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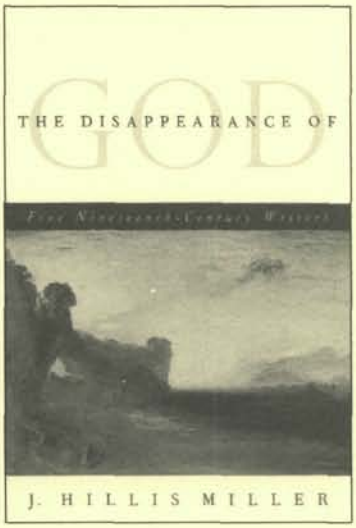

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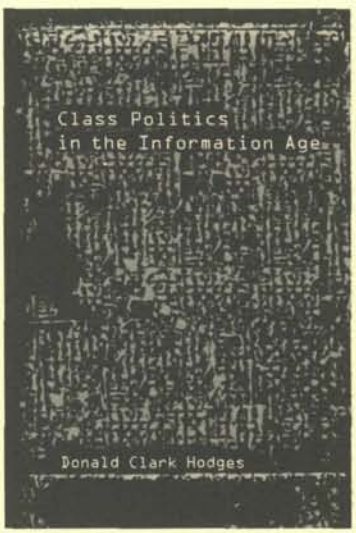

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—RALPH WALDO EMERSON, "The American Scholar," 1837

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Too Close to Call

Our staff recently learned that the SCHOLAR has won the *Utne Reader*'s Alternative Press Award for Writing Excellence for the second year in a row. (The first time around, I got a subversive thrill just from having been considered a member of the "alternative press," but I soon realized that in this context, "alternative" merely means "devoid of ads for expensive cars.") Our citation reads: "Ever thoughtful, never precious, THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR . . . proves once again that the life of the mind and mastery of the pen need not be separate careers."

Matched in editorial competition against journalistic leviathans, the SCHOLAR often feels like a sardine. Our greatest moment of triumph came at the 1999 National Magazine Awards, when our tiny crew (we couldn't afford to send the whole staff) was seated next to a large, boisterous table of *Sports Illustrated* editors. They were placing bets on which magazine would win the Feature Writing award: *The New Yorker, Esquire,* or *GQ*. No one deigned to mention the fourth finalist. When I'm having a bad day, I like to close my eyes and recollect the expression on the faces of those *SI* editors when the winner was announced.

My favorite competition, however, is one we're guaranteed to win: the American Scholar Awards (see page 147). Every year, our staff and Editorial Board convene to honor the SCHOLAR's own best writing. Though there was nothing dimpled or dangling, this year's vote for Best Essay was every bit as close as the presidential election. Closer, in fact. Two essays—"The Soul of Plutarchos," by Brian Doyle, and "Cut Time," by Carlo Rotella—were in a dead heat. (*Where but the* SCHOLAR, I thought, *would pieces on Plutarch and boxing be in the same race?*) It was particularly bracing to hear Board member Catharine Stimpson—who, as the former director of the MacArthur fellowship program, is used to handing out six-figure grants—taking so seriously a contest whose *palme d'or* is a five-year free subscription.

Some comments on the Doyle essay: "Admirably shaped and conceived." "Cinematic." "Daringly unfashionable." "Not afraid to wear its heart on its sleeve." On Rotella's: "Strikingly fresh." "Vivid." "Visceral." "The kind of essay that gives you a new metaphor for experience."

We voted and revoted. Seven to seven. Unlike the U.S. electoral system, the SCHOLAR permits ties. "Cut Time" also won the award for "Best Work by a Younger Writer." I hope Carlo Rotella likes our journal, because his letter carrier will be bringing it to him for the next ten years.

A. F.

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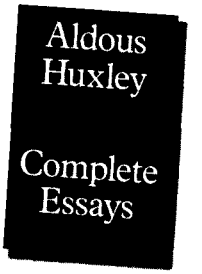

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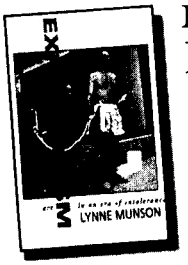

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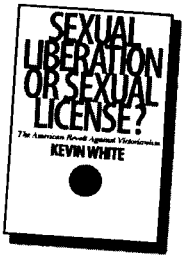

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AT LARGE AND AT SMALL

Moving

PHILONOË

From time to time, after we decided to move from New York City to western Massachusetts, my mind came to rest on the dispiriting example of James Montgomery Whitmore, my great-great-grandfather. Whitmore was a Mormon convert who traveled by covered wagon from Waxahachie, Texas, to Salt Lake City in 1857. Five years later, believing he had received a divine call to serve as a missionary in southern Utah, he sold his mercantile business, hauled his family down to Pipe Springs, bought livestock, planted grapevines, and started spreading the word. In 1866, a band of Paiute Indians stole a flock of sheep from his pasture, and when Whitmore and a hired hand followed their tracks onto the open plain, they were ambushed and shot. A posse of ninety men found their bodies twelve days later, buried under the snow.

Though the chances of ambush in Massachusetts were slim, I did not feel my family history augured well. My great-great-grandfather should have stayed in Waxahachie; maybe we should stay in New York. But every time I walked past my husband's desk, I saw a yellow Post-it on his bulletin board that read, "The only safe thing is to take a chance." The quotation was attributed to Elaine May, who would have agreed with Wallace Stegner: "Why remain in one dull plot of earth when Heaven was reachable, was touchable, was just over there?"

My husband and I didn't think Manhattan was a dull plot of earth. I'd lived there for twenty-five years, George for twenty-one. We liked Mets games and New York accents. We liked Juilliard students who played Boccherini in subway stations and Sikh taxi drivers who wore turbans. We liked to walk from our loft in SoHo to Goody's, our favorite restaurant in Chinatown, and slurp Shanghai soup dumplings from large porcelain spoons. We liked our building, a turn-of-the-century box factory whose upper floors, when I moved there in 1978, were still served by a freight elevator that bore a hand-lettered sign: PLEASE RETURN THIS ELEVATOR TO THE GLUEING DEPARTMENT.

But as we grew older, we found ourselves inclining tropistically toward open spaces. It was impossible to describe our nature-cravings without sounding like Wordsworth, only more blubbery, so George and I avoided the subject around our friends, most of whom would have become seriously ill had they moved more than five blocks from the nearest bagel shop. We had both spent our early childhoods in New England, imprinted at tender ages by the smell of mown grass, the pea-green color of the air before a summer cloudburst, the taste of butter-and-sugar corn—the methods of whose eating my family had divided into two categories, Rotary (round and round) and Typewriter (left to right). (George and I added a third, Dot Matrix, for those who favor a back-and-forth approach.) We wanted those things again. Besides, our younger child was fond of projectiles—balls, slingshots, airplanes, rockets, arrows, torpedoes—and we were tired of shouting *"Not at the wedding pictures!"* Henry needed a yard.

We couldn't afford a weekend country house, and might not have wanted one anyway: too much like having a wife and a mistress. Serial monogamy seemed preferable. About ten years ago, we started talking about a second, rural phase. Since we were both writers, we could live anywhere we could plug in our modems. Cautiously, easing into the water by slow degrees, we visited college towns (bookstores, foreign films, possible teaching jobs) in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, and

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Maine. Some had houses priced beyond our means; some were too far from George's family, who live in Boston. We settled on the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts, named for the Puritan frontiersmen of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, large numbers of whom, like my great-great-grandfather, were massacred by Indians who thought they should have stayed home.

When Sir Walter Elliot, the self-absorbed baronet in *Persuasion*, becomes "distressed for money," he decides to move out of his ancestral manor in Somersetshire. It is suggested that he might be able to stay put if he practiced certain economies, but he cannot imagine such a fall. "What! Every comfort of life knocked off! Journeys, London, servants, horses, table,—contractions and restrictions every where. To live no longer with the decencies of a private gentleman! No, he would sooner quit Kellynch-hall at once, than remain in it on such disgraceful terms."

Sir Walter is defined by his home. *The Baronetage*, the only book he ever reads, opens of its own accord to the page headed "ELLIOT OF KELLYNCH-HALL." When he becomes ELLIOT OF A-RENTED-HOUSE-IN-BATH, will he still be himself? (Yes, says Jane Austen. He's just as obnoxious as ever.) It makes Sir Walter uneasy to think of a tenant living in *his* bedchamber, taking walks through *his* grounds. "I am not fond," he observes, "of the idea of my shrubberies being always approachable."

We felt that way, too. Afraid to burn our bridges, we decided to rent out our loft, furnished, so we could creep back if we started missing soup dumplings too severely. We owned no shrubberies, but I wasn't sure that I wished strangers to approach the corner of the living room where we had exchanged our wedding vows, the bathtub that had soothed my first labor pains, the bed in which we had exchanged a thousand embraces and a thousand confidences. Would they appreciate "Nudes for Nudes," a series of four pencil sketches by George's mother that we had affixed permanently to the shower wall? (I have always believed that it is unsporting for fully clothed people to look at pictures of naked ones; the placement of this work was designed to even things up.) Would they be properly impressed by the dining-room lamp, a large black contraption that had formerly graced the Erie-Lackawanna railway station in Hoboken, New Jersey, and was still equipped with an anti-moth-immolation grille?

Sir Walter forbids anyone to mention that he is letting his house: "It was only on the supposition of his being spontaneously solicited by some most unexceptionable applicant, on his own terms, and as a great favor, that he would let it at all." We had no such qualms. We engaged a real estate agent who dressed in black and had an Italian first name and a last name that was half French and half Spanish. (It was hyphenated. Paolo was far too upscale to have only one name.) He walked around the loft. I'm not sure he appreciated "Nudes for Nudes." I saw him eyeing the aquamarine felt-tip-pen stain on the chair near the front door, the grungy sofa, the ancient gas stove. "It will be just right," he said in his expensive Italian-French-Spanish accent, "for a very special person."

Paolo wrote a display ad for the *New York Times* real estate section headlined "EXPRESS YOUR INTERIOR WORLD." At first I wasn't sure what this meant, but I hadn't spent all those undergraduate hours on *explication de texte* for nothing. Eventually I deconstructed it. It meant: "You—the very special person whose next address will be 150 Thompson Street—may look like an investment banker, but inside your three-piece suit there lives a starving poet who is crying to get out." The ad continued: "This bohemian loft [read: there are no Sub-Zero appliances] oozes charm & character [read: there are children's fingerprints on the walls] only found in original old SoHo [read: there's only one bathroom]." In its favor, the loft did have "wd flrs, orig beamed ceils, and grt clsts."

Although there are pages and pages in *Persuasion* about whether Sir Walter will find the right tenants, there is not a word about cleaning up Kellynch-hall before its prospective occupants come to inspect it. Nineteenth-century novels never mention such matters. The servants take care of them. Even if the tenants were to drop in unannounced, the silver would already be polished, the floors waxed, the carpets beaten, and the ancestral portraits straightened. Paolo did not find our loft in a similar state of readiness.

"The animals will have to go," he observed.

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The animals! How thrilling! He made it sound as if we kept a pack of ocelots. In fact, our menagerie consisted of Silkie, Susannah's hamster, and Bunky, Henry's frog, both of whom lived in plastic boxes on the dining-room table, underneath the lamp from the Erie-Lackawanna railway station.

"The kitchen is cluttered," he added. Before Paolo's arrival, I had spent three hours de-cluttering it. There wasn't a single object on the counters. No one could toast, blend, or make coffee in this kitchen; it was apparently owned by people who had been born without digestive tracts. This met with Paolo's approval. The problem was the family photographs posted with magnets on the refrigerator. "No personal effects," he explained, using a phrase I had heard only on television detective shows, describing corpses that had been robbed before they were murdered.

We banished the animals to Henry's bedroom, expunged our personal effects, spread a patchwork quilt on the sofa, replaced the Revereware teakettle with an imported red enamel coffeepot you couldn't pick up without a potholder, replaced the potholder, repainted the kitchen cabinets, scrubbed the windows, mopped the floors, rolled out a Persian rug the children weren't allowed to walk on, moved nine bags of toys to our neighbor's loft, and propped the pillows vertically on our bed, which meant that all the comfortable ones—the soft, saggy blobs you could bury your cheek in—were extradited to the closet. It could have been worse. If we'd been selling the loft instead of just renting it, we might have been tempted to hire a fluffer. (*Fluffer* is a term borrowed from pornographic filmmaking; he or she gets the male star ready for the camera.) In the housing market, the fluffer—also known as a stager—induces a temporary state of real-estate tumescence by removing much of what the client owns and replacing it, from a private warehouse of props, with new furniture, carpets, plants, paintings, towels, sheets, shower curtains, throw pillows, lamp shades, ice buckets (to hold champagne next to the Jacuzzi), breakfast trays (to hold tea and the Sunday *Times*), and Scrabble sets (to spell out BEAUTIFUL HOME). One fluffer ordered his client to remove a Georgia O'Keeffe painting from the wall and hide it under the bed. The colors were wrong.

Even though our loft was prepared by amateurs—self-fluffed, as it were—it had never looked better. We rented it to a kindly macroeconomist. The Elliots rent Kellynch-hall to a kindly admiral who keeps the house shipshape, though he moves the umbrellas from the butler's room to the hallway and strips Sir Walter's dressing room of most of its looking glasses. "Oh Lord!" Admiral Croft explains, "there was no getting away from oneself."

"No getting away from oneself": that is both the fear and the hope of people who move. If you're pulling up stakes in order to remake your life and your character, what if you go to all that trouble and end up no more changed than Sir Walter? On the other hand, what if your identity is stuck with such firm adhesive to your old home that you leave little bits behind, and your new self is tattered and diminished?

According to the sociologist James M. Jasper, it is no wonder that Americans name their cars Quests and Explorers and Ventures and Caravans. We move more than anyone else. In a typical year, 20 percent of all Americans relocate, as compared with 4 percent of all Germans, 8 percent of all British, and 10 percent of all Japanese. Each of those one-in-five Americans flouts the law laid down by almost every book whose plot revolves around relocation: *Stay where you are!* Can you think of a happy book about moving? I can't. It's fine to hie yourself to Troy or Oz or Narnia or Wonderland, as long as you end up back where you started—and, indeed, a frequent theme in books about travel, whether real or imaginary, is the central character's strenuous efforts to get home. (Traveling is always thought to be more enjoyable than moving: we envy foreign correspondents but pity army brats.) A typical children's-book move is the one made by the orphaned heroines of *The Secret Garden* and *A Little Princess* from warm, fecund India to cold, dreary England. Even the *Little House* series, in which the Ingalls family stays intact and reasonably content as it moves from woods to prairie to creek to lake, becomes incrementally less idyllic with each volume. Most discouraging of all is the sort of educational volume, illustrated with photographs of cheerful moving men, that extols the joys of leaving your friends and

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starting a new school; you can tell the author is lying because the next title in the series is usually something like *Tonsillectomies Are Fun!*

And as we pass out of childhood, what do we read? *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which young Martin moves to America, falls ill with fever, and loses all his money in a land swindle; *Main Street*, in which Carol Kennicott moves to Gopher Prairie and is suffocated by small-town life; *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which the Joads move to California and—well, you know the rest. From birth to adulthood, our lives are a journey away from Eden; and that—because it matches our own trajectory—is the only direction the literary moving van can go.

When I was eight, our family moved from Connecticut to southern California. The weather was balmy, the beach broad, the incidence of runny noses low. But objective merit means little to a child. All I knew was that the light was too bright, the shadows were too hard, the landscape had too much brown.

I hoped that our move to Massachusetts would be not a deracination but a re-racination. During our last three months in New York, I was encouraged in this view by the e-mails I received from the owner of the place we were going to rent, a foursquare yellow clapboard farmhouse built in 1804, on the east bank of the Connecticut River, by Elijah and Resign Graves. (Those Puritans! It was coercive enough to name your daughter Felicity or Chastity, but Resign!) Our landlord, whose family was planning to spend a sabbatical year in London, was a science writer who had just completed the labels for an insect exhibition that featured a rare birdwing butterfly collected by a man who was eaten by cannibals. As the spring and summer progressed, she sent us frequent nature bulletins: The trillium was blooming. Two orioles had been spotted on the quince bushes. The red fox had trotted through the pasture. The hummingbirds had returned. The mother wrens were peering out of their nestbox. The boys had found two toads.

How familiar it all sounded! Frances Hodgson Burnett would never have sent Sara Crewe back to India, but our lives were not a novel. Might it be possible to journey backward instead of forward?

We'd find out soon enough. But first we had to deal with our To Do list: Fill out change-of-address forms. Re-glue kitchen cabinet knobs. Fix toilet. Unclog bathtub drain. Get sofa and chairs cleaned. Go to dentist. Get renter's insurance. Disconnect phone and utilities. Send transcripts to children's new school. Switch bank accounts. Duplicate keys. Write farewell note to neighbors. Cancel *New York Times*. We had to compile a list of instructions for our tenants: Put out garbage on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, recycling on Wednesday only. Open the hall closet by pushing, not pulling. Remember to replace the water in the plastic lint catcher. (Our future landlord wrote us a similar list: Don't let the children touch the bat poop in the attic. Protect potato chips from mice by suspending bags from the ceiling. Feed suet to woodpeckers and thistle seed to finches.)

Our grt clsts held layers we hadn't seen for years. New Yorkers, lacking attics and basements and garages, treat their closets like trash compactors (or, to put it more charitably, like the squeezing machines that turn duck breasts into *canard pressé*). The by-products of our shared lives had been compressed into a dense sediment that, when pried out and spread on the floor, expanded by a factor of ten. How could we have accumulated so many outgrown hiking boots, so many mateless mittens, so many letters from people who had once loomed large and now, like distant telephone poles, had shrunk to near-invisibility?

I had imagined that our final weeks would be sweet, a last hurrah of city-love, but we were too busy for sentiment. In our early days together, George and I had walked down Prince Street every night, holding hands. Now we walked the same route every afternoon, dragging our cast-off possessions to Goodwill.

We packed 347 boxes. (I know the number because it is written on the moving company's invoice; the total weight was six tons.) We vowed we would never buy another book. We broke our nails peeling packing tape from slippery brown rolls. We kept losing our scissors, our Magic Markers, our color-coded dots (green for the new house, red for storage); later, we discovered that we had boxed them up.

When we left for Massachusetts, I had been awake for three days and three nights. Our rented car was so full that the rearview mirror was useless. Susannah held Silkie's terrarium

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between her knees. I held Bunky's aquarium between my feet. As we drove north on Interstate 91, I thought: This is the worst mistake I have ever made in my life. George and I will never get another writing assignment. Susannah will hang out at the mall. Henry will chew gum. The sushi will be frozen.

When I was younger, I spent several years studying the Hmong, a montagnard tribe whose entire culture had evolved around their frequent migrations. Their wood and bamboo houses could be taken apart, portaged in modular chunks, and put back together. Their great arts were textiles, jewelry, music, and storytelling. Everything was physically and psychologically portable, so it was possible to move without cutting off roots.

In the car, I was certain we could never do that: our reassembled lives would look nothing like our old ones. But when we drove down our new driveway, my despair lifted with a crazy whoosh that cannot be explained even by the lability of fatigue. My eyes filled with tears. The yellow house was beautiful. A few minutes later, the moving van pulled in, and I asked the driver to locate a box that I had labeled in red on all six sides: BALLS BALLS BALLS BALLS BALLS BALLS. At a school auction, we had been the high bidders on a set of balls of every conceivable genre—football, basketball, volleyball, softball, tennis, soccer, bocce. Henry spilled them out onto the back lawn and ran in circles, tossing and kicking and rolling.

That night, as we lay in bed, I murmured, "George! We're really in the country! Listen to the peepers on the riverbank!"

"Those aren't peepers on the riverbank," George said gently. "That's Bunky, on Henry's bureau. We're hearing him over the baby monitor."

As the weeks passed, we missed New York, sometimes acutely, but that did not make us love the Pioneer Valley any less. I reminded myself that the most happily remarried widows are the ones who had the best first marriages.

George and Susannah swam every day in the Connecticut River and reported what they had seen on the bottom (a golf bag, a glove, a potato). Henry and I bicycled to the corner store, which, unlike its SoHo analogue, had signs in the window offering night crawlers and chewing tobacco—but it also had seven brands of ice cream and a luxuriant hawthorn tree out front. On our fourth visit, Henry settled himself under the hawthorn and said, with a five-year-old's easily acquired sense of permanency, "This is where we always sit."

Last month, we signed the papers on an 1807 brick farmhouse in a neighboring town. When we learned that it needed a new roof, we refused to look at any materials that were not guaranteed to last at least twenty-five years.

It is true that I had a great-great-grandfather who was killed by Indians, but these days I find myself thinking more often of another great-great-grandfather, also a Utah pioneer. John Sharp moved from Clackmannanshire, Scotland, where he had worked in a coal mine, to New Orleans, then to St. Louis, and finally, in 1850, to Salt Lake City. His journey to Utah was, I will grudgingly admit, even more arduous than our journey up Interstate 91. The first snows overtook his wagon train, and he and his party spent the winter in caves they dug in the side of Red Butte Canyon, roofing them with wagon boxes and walling them with stones.

When Sharp arrived in Salt Lake City, the skills he had acquired in the mines of Clackmannanshire won him the contract for quarrying and hauling, by ox-drawn wagon, the huge blocks of granite that were to form the foundation of the Mormon Tabernacle. He later became manager of the quarry, then superintendent of public works, and finally a director of the Union Pacific Railroad. In 1869, at Promontory Point, he helped drive the golden spike that completed the transcontinental railroad, enabling people to move across the country by train instead of covered wagon.

In 1904, an article about John Sharp was published in the monthly magazine of the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association. It pointed out that had Sharp stayed in Scotland, he might never have left the coal pits. His life, noted the anonymous author, "teaches the lesson that to succeed one must struggle with circumstance, and overcome by faith and toil; that change, evolution, and action, secure mental and material progress; while, on the contrary, traveling self-satisfied in ruts, seeking sameness, and courting inaction, are conditions to be avoided."

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Autumn leaf fires. The cook is drunk. Children make a barricade of leaves. Frost has slaughtered the begonias.

—JOHN CHEEVER,
Journals, *1966*

Time is to clock as mind is to brain. The clock or watch somehow contains the time. And yet time refuses to be bottled up like a genie stuffed in a lamp. Whether it flows as sand or turns on wheels within wheels, time escapes irretrievably, while we watch. Even when the bulbs of the hourglass shatter, when darkness withholds the shadow from the sundial, when the mainspring winds down so far that the clock hands hold still as death, time itself keeps on.

—DAVA SOBEL,
Longitude, *1995*

As natural selection acts solely by the preservation of profitable modifications, each new force will tend in a fully-stocked country to take the place of, and finally to exterminate, its own less improved parent-form and other less favoured forms with which it comes into competition. Thus extinction and natural selection go hand in hand.

—CHARLES DARWIN,
The Origin of Species, *1859*

Natural selection can be viewed simply as the differential increase of alleles within a population. It does not matter whether the population is increasing, decreasing, or holding steady. So long as one allele is increasing relative to another, the population is evolving. In fact, a population can be evolving rapidly, responding to natural selection and hence "adapting," at the same time that it is going extinct.

—EDWARD O. WILSON,
Sociobiology: The New Synthesis, *1975*

These facts have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce for ever these unfeeling brethren. We must endeavor to forget our former love for them, and to hold them as we hold the rest of mankind, enemies in war, in peace friends; but a communication of grandeur & of freedom it seems is below their dignity. Be it so, since they will have it, the road to happiness & to glory is open to us too. We will tread it apart from them.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON,
passage deleted (over his objections) from the Declaration of Independence, June 1776

COMMONPLACE BOOK

Transitions

COLLECTED BY
ANDRÉ BERNARD

When the others had left the library, I went to the record player and selected one of my favorites, the musical score from *Victory at Sea* by Richard Rodgers. I put it on and turned the volume up high. My thoughts meshed with the music. The battle had been long and arduous. We had suffered reverses and won final victories. The struggle had been hard fought. But now we had the final victory. The music captured the moment for me better than anything I could say or think or write.

—RICHARD M. NIXON,
on winning a presidential election, November 5, 1968

It is time for me to go.

—AL GORE,
conceding a presidential election, December 13, 2000

This is the plight of the reader of the general news. If he is to read it at all, he must be interested, that is to say, he must enter into the situation and care about the outcome. . . . The more passionately involved he becomes, the more he will tend to resent not only a different view, but a disturbing bit of news. That is why many a newspaper finds that, having honestly evoked the partisanship of its readers, it cannot easily, supposing the editor believes the facts warrant it, change position. If a change is necessary, the transition has to be managed with the utmost skill and delicacy. Usually a newspaper will not attempt so hazardous a performance. It is easier and safer to have the news of that subject taper off and disappear, thus putting out the fire by starving it.

—WALTER LIPPMANN,
Public Opinion, *1922*

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The wild rejoicing on the part of the emancipated coloured people lasted but for a brief period, for I noticed that by the time they returned to their cabins there was a change in their feelings. The great responsibility of being free, of having charge of themselves and their children, seemed to take possession of them. It was very much like suddenly turning a youth of ten or twelve years out into the world to provide for himself. . . . Was it any wonder that within a few hours the wild rejoicing ceased and a feeling of deep gloom seemed to pervade the slave quarters?

—BOOKER T. WASHINGTON,
on the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation, in Up From Slavery, *1901*

Drinks are absorbed by the animal system with felicity; their effect is immediate, and the relief which they give us is in a way instantaneous. Give to a tired man the most substantial foods, and he will eat them but painfully and without any appreciative benefit. Give him a glass of wine or brandy, and in an instant he feels better and you will see him come to life again.

—JEAN ANTHELME BRILLAT-SAVARIN,
The Physiology of Taste, *1825,*
translated by M. F. K. Fisher

Man wants to see nature and evolution as separate from human activities. There is the natural world, and there is man. But man also belongs to the natural world. If he is a ferocious predator, that too is part of evolution. If cod and haddock and other species cannot survive because man kills them, something more adaptable will take their place. Nature, the ultimate pragmatist, doggedly searches for something that works. But as the cockroach demonstrates, what works best in nature does not always appeal to us.

—MARK KURLANSKY,
Cod: A Biography of the Fish
That Changed the World, *1997*

There are two ways open to all men of changing their ways for the better—one is through their own disasters and one through those of others; that involving their own calamities is the more vivid, but the one involving of others is less painful. Therefore the former method should never be chosen voluntarily, since it effects its improvement along with great labors and risks; but the latter method should always be sought out, since in it we can see the better course without being injured.

—POLYBIUS *(died c. 118* B.C.),
Histories, Book I.35

When the young jazz musician comes out of the Conservatory, he still needs to learn much that cannot be taught by books and masters. He needs to learn what people are thinking and feeling; he needs to adjust to the *contemporariness* of the times and the people whom he wishes to express, and for whom he wishes to interpret life. And human needs of feeling can change overnight! Hence, no doubt, the many kinds of jazz freedom we find. It's like moving a person from a room with a red light, into another room lit by amber light. It's the same person, but he looks different.

—DUKE ELLINGTON,
interview with Etude Magazine, *1947*

Coming to America was like being transferred from one century to another. The change was so great.

—ANDY JOHNSON,
on arriving from Finland, 1906, in Studs Terkel,
American Dreams: Lost and Found, *1980*

We are all bodies in motion and at rest—there in George's master bedroom, in the gray light of the midmorning, an hour or so after his daughter found him because he didn't answer when she called this morning, and he always answers, and she always calls, so she got in the car and drove over and found him exactly as we find him here: breathless, unfettered, perfectly still, manifestly indifferent to all this hubbub.

—THOMAS LYNCH,
Bodies in Motion and at Rest:
On Metaphor and Mortality, *2000*

On one of Mead's last nights, Austin Ford learned, she had told her nurse that she was dying.

"Yes," the nurse said gently. "We all will, someday."

"But this is different," Mead said.

—JANE HOWARD,
Margaret Mead: A Life, *1984*

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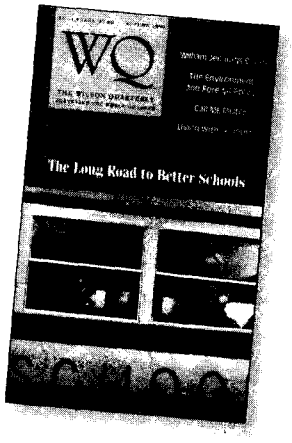

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The End of Linguistics

Taking the Language Back from Nature—and Linguists

MARK HALPERN

There is only one thing everyone knows about language—that it's a living, growing thing—so it seems particularly unfortunate that the notion should be false. This metaphor may once have served some useful purpose; today it is a noxious cloud whose effect is to stifle rational discussion of linguistic matters. It is heard whenever A questions a usage of B's: someone, usually C, will counter the criticism by reciting the one thing everyone knows—and with that remark, reason flies out the window. You raise your eyebrows at B's use of *reticent* to mean *reluctant*? You think him ignorant for using *disinterested* to mean *uninterested*? You groan because he speaks of *running the gauntlet*? I tell you in response that language is a living, growing thing; thus I refute pedantry—and carry the day!

So enthralled are we by this metaphor that it is almost painful—like massaging back to life a leg that has fallen asleep—to force ourselves to recognize that every point it asserts is false. Language is not living, not growing, and not a thing; it is a vast system of social habits and conventions, inherited from our forebears, and showing every sign of being an artifact rather than an organic growth. Certainly languages, or at least aspects of them, exhibit some changes over time—but then, so do the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the barometer, and the Oregon coastline, none of which we characterize as living or growing. And the most impressive changes observed in any language—loss of inflected forms, of moods,

Mark Halpern is an editor and writer who lives in Oakland, California. He is the author of *Binding Time*, a book on computer programming, and has contributed articles to the *Atlantic Monthly*, *IEEE Spectrum*, and the *Vocabula Review*.

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and of tenses—are in the direction of simplification and economy, not of the enlargement, elaboration, and proliferation we call growth. The changes exhibited by our language in historical times make it plain that it alters only when it is altered by us, its users, and never of its own accord, since it has no accord. It is, in fact, *inert*—we cannot call it *dead*, primarily because it never lived, but also because we have, rather tellingly, reserved *dead language* for one whose native speakers are dead.

It is the vivacity of its users that makes the attribution to inert language of life and growth so nearly irresistible; languages seem to have many of the marks of living, growing things because they are bound up so closely with beings who are indeed alive. At one moment in history, it's true, language did seem to be possessed of a life of its own and not to be simply a reflection of our needs and desires; it seemed to follow its own developmental laws. But that historical moment, which will be discussed later, has passed. Over the last few centuries, we humans have taken charge of our languages just as we took charge of our food supply in going from plant gathering to agriculture, and as we will shortly be taking charge of our genetic makeup. A modern language changes when we change it, and the metaphor that makes it autonomous only obscures our real task, which is to consider just how and why we change it.

By far the most common kind of change we make to our language today is an addition to its vocabulary, made for the entirely innocent reason that a new creature has been observed in Eden, and Adam is called on to perform again his onomastic function. There may be occasional objections to the particular token Adam chooses, but no one objects in principle to the coining of new words for new things. Apart from this unexceptionable and linguistically trivial kind of change, innovations in language today are almost always the result of four forces that I will call *Simple Ignorance, Social Climbing, Semantic Inflation,* and *Group Solidarity.*

Simple Ignorance is a mistaken but entirely excusable reason for changing the language—at least I hope it is excusable, because I have been guilty of it, and fear that I will be guilty of it again. For some years I thought there was such a thing as *infrared* (rhymes with *impaired*) light, because I had seen *infra-red* spelled without the hyphen and failed to recognize it. For years I gave full value to the syllable *-is-* in names like *Salisbury.* And so on; the list of my errors is a long one. (I intrude my personal failings into this discussion because I would have no one think that Simple Ignorance is a bludgeon that I have created to beat others with.)

Most of the time Simple Ignorance can be corrected without arousing hostility in the Simply Ignorant; if the correction is made tactfully, most of the S.I. will accept it without resentment, sometimes even gratefully. But sometimes the would-be benefactor is told that he is a pedant, a reaction-

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ary, or some other kind of villain for presuming to correct a free-born, native speaker of the language. And while he is no villain, it is true that he is sometimes a hero come too late.

It is probably too late, for example, to correct the widespread notion that *ilk* means *type* or *class*, or that a *cohort* is a *buddy*, *partner*, *sidekick*, or *colleague*. But if we give up on these points, it is not a triumph of the new and improved over the old and obsolete, or even a replacement of the old by something just as good—it is simply loss, and a capitulation to entropy or *force majeure*. The new usage does not even offer the stimulation of novelty, because its users are not aware that it is new; we have all lost, and no one has won. Two kinds of price will have to be paid for this surrender: we will have lost good words for our own later use, and we will have lost yet another small connection to the literature of the past. Losing *ilk*, we will not know how to convey briefly that we are speaking not of just any Campbell, but of *the* Campbell, nor will we understand some passages of Walter Scott's; nor will we be able, having lost *cohort*, to picture what the onslaught of the Assyrians must have looked like. And all we will have in return is one more loose synonym for *type* or *class* or *kind* or *category*—not much of a testimonial to the worth of a living, growing language.

Social Climbing is a less innocent but still forgivable cause of language change. Into this category fall all the usages that we adopt in the hope that they will cause others to think more highly of us: the fancy, half-understood word; the misspelled or mispronounced French or Latin tag that is supposed to make us sound worldly or learned; the misapplied scientific or technical term that is meant to suggest we are adepts in one of the modern black arts such as electronics or programming; the adoption by whites who wish to sound street-smart of inner-city African-American vocabulary and speech patterns; the insider's term that makes it clear that we are savvy, in the know, wised-up, witting, clued in, and otherwise among the cognoscenti.

These variants of Social Climbing differ in the amount of damage they do. It probably costs the community nothing if some members, hoping to be taken for movie-industry dealmakers, talk of *taking a meeting* (or even a *meet*) or *doing* lunch, but there is a price to be paid when our fellow citizens talk of making a *quantum jump* when they mean a very large, significant jump: that practice will cause some to misunderstand the phrase when they see it correctly used, and their misunderstanding could have harmful consequences. (And there is probably no such thing as a *perfectly* harmless misunderstanding; given the right circumstances, any error can prove disastrous.) When the Social Climbing is downward—a yielding to *nostalgie de la boue*—it can have even more serious consequences. When blacks hear whites try to "talk black," they may feel contempt, or resentment at having what they thought was their private

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property co-opted (see Group Solidarity, below), or rage because they think they are being mocked.

Semantic Inflation is the response of the hurried or unimaginative to the facts that figures of speech, like all artifacts, wear out and lose effectiveness over time; that countless voices are competing for public attention, making it necessary, apparently, to scream if one would be heard; and that the substance of what we have to say is often a stale cake that needs tarting up with the most garish possible frosting. Recognizing these facts, many language users are constantly in search of verbal novelties and new levels of hyperbole to give their utterances some chance of winning our attention, with often ludicrous results.

This is the quest that has so many routinely calling a pretty dress *awesome,* a becoming hairdo *devastating,* and a fetching hat *divine*; that uses *genocide* for any random massacre, or even for social and political events that involve no deaths at all; that calls a university-town neighborhood known for fine restaurants and fancy groceries the *gourmet ghetto.* It has produced a generation that has never seen *wicked, sinful, depraved, outrageous,* or *decadent* in print except on dessert menus, and might be surprised to learn that such terms once played other roles. The last word in this direction—one hopes—is the claim made by the half-defiant, half-terrified user of a threadbare figure of speech that it's not a figure at all: "I literally exploded with anger!" says this pathetic seeker of our attention and regard. One bad effect of this is to make the speaker or writer ridiculous; another, more serious for the rest of us, is to rob us of the use of the inflated terms for their older purposes.

There are a few variants or subgenres of Semantic Inflation that are worth mentioning before we pass on: one is the turning of what was a merely factual term into a reproach; another, the mirror image of the first, is the dimming of what was a euphemism into a merely factual term. As an illustration of the first, consider the career of *stereotype.* Once merely a synonym of *cliché,* it has became a condemnation of any attempt to generalize about any human group, particularly one felt to be in need of protection, with a meaning lying somewhere between *unwarranted generalization* and *false accusation.* This represents something close to a complete reversal in meaning: where *stereotype* once meant a characterization that, although boring, was probably true, it now means one that, although perhaps provocative, is false. Here, for example, is a contributor to an Internet discussion group, objecting to a description of librarians as harsh enforcers, within their domains, of the rule of silence: "News flash! The grim librarian is a stereotype." No explicit claim that it is a *false* stereotype; no need, since *stereotype* now includes, indeed consists mainly of, the notion of falsity.

The opposite type of change (call it Semantic Deflation), in which a formerly effective euphemism loses its euphemistic powers and becomes

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merely the standard term for the unpleasantness it once tried to shield us from, is illustrated by the career of *misunderstanding*. Would-be spreaders of oil on troubled waters have called so many conflicts *misunderstandings* where the combatants had a perfect understanding of each other's intentions (as when two dogs fight over a bone) that the term has lost all its placatory power, and is now just the ordinary term for a quarrel.

Group Solidarity is deliberate language change, made for the purpose of affirming our identification with or support of some group at odds with mainstream society. Does that society say *homosexual*? We say *gay*. Do we suspect that people call us, in private, *niggers*? Then we will call ourselves that in public. And so on. These language changes are political acts; whether one sympathizes with them or not, they are not primarily *linguistic* developments, any more than throwing a bomb is primarily an exercise in ballistics.

All these, of course, are changes merely to vocabulary or to minute and localized points of usage, and utterly trivial in the eyes of linguistic science—mere froth on the surface of the ocean of language. But these are the changes that exercise the public, including linguistic scientists when they are acting simply as citizens and controversialists; these are the ones that cause debate and conflict. Really deep language change, such as a drift from agglutinative to analytic syntax, is, like geological change, something that very few people other than scholars are even aware of, let alone passionate about.

So much for a thumbnail sketch of what I call the Fallacy of Linguistic Autonomy and the chief modes of modern language change; more needs to be said of them, but this will do for now. The point to note is that none of these modes of language change has anything to do with laws of linguistic science, any more than horoscopes have to do with laws of astronomical science.

Another prevalent fallacy about language, the Fallacy of Pedantic Persecution, springs from a myth of the kind that we freedom-loving Americans are especially susceptible to: the myth according to which the language and its users are born free and naturally creative, but are everywhere in the chains of pettifogging, narrow-minded, legalistic, reactionary, and mean-spirited pedants, sworn to thwart aspiring young writers, to blight literature with oppressive and irrelevant rules, and generally to take the bloom off the linguistic and literary roses.

All this superstructure of nonsense rests, at least in part, on the underlying delusion that language itself is a living, growing thing, so this fallacy is not strictly a fundamental one, but derivative of the Linguistic Autonomy fallacy. But it is so rampant a growth that merely killing its root will leave it still in place for a long time to come, living on the vegetable equivalent of stored fat; it must be attacked in its own right, treated as if it

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were an independently false axiom of the system. And, as noted earlier, the effort necessary to grasp inwardly that language is merely an aspect of human behavior, not an independent entity—that it has no nature, no destiny, no desires, no "genius," no yearning to be free—is so great that we need all the help we can get to make it.

In order to preserve their delusions on this point, would-be linguistic liberators have to fantasize that we are beleaguered by schoolmarms threatening to crack our knuckles with a hickory stick if we split an infinitive, use a double negative, or commit any of the other solecisms that nineteenth-century teachers were so alert for, and that, no doubt, a few twenty-first-century ones still are. It is also necessary to cherish the illusion that there are many potentially great writers who have been crushed and silenced by the strictures of these pedants, and that we have been deprived of many a masterpiece by such oppression. The best short retort to these fevered imaginings is that of Flannery O'Connor:

> Everywhere I go I'm asked if the university stifles writers. My opinion is that they don't stifle enough of them. There's many a bestseller that could have been prevented by a good teacher.

Unfortunately, there are not enough good teachers, and those angry rebels who would free language from the shackles of the pedants are almost always rebelling against an early bout with bad teaching. (Not that the teaching need be bad to arouse student hostility: there is frequently a conflict between the young writer, who generally wants to write stories about himself and his feelings, and the teacher—the possibly very good teacher—who is more interested in teaching him the mechanics of good writing than in giving him an opportunity to "express himself.")

Some of the poor wretches whose job it is to try to turn anti-literate adolescents into tolerable writers fall back, in their desperation, on rules as a way of breaking their students of at least their worst practices—they surely know that no body of rules will ever turn a bad writer into a good one, but the sheer number of poorly prepared students they have to cope with forces them to reach for the nearest and crudest of tools. So they tell their charges not to use the passive voice, or not to end a sentence with a preposition, or not to start a sentence with *and*, and so on. These rules—even the ones for which there is some rational basis—do not help the poorer students, and infuriate or depress the potentially good ones. And some of these potentially good ones will go on to build a skyscraper of resentment against all rules and all authority on the foundation of the frustration they experienced at school.

These schoolchild grievances remain smoldering in many adult minds, and need only a whiff of oxygen to flame up even after many years. When a short article of mine that incidentally said a good word for

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rules was published a few years ago in the *Atlantic*, a number of its readers demanded that I specify just what rules I had in mind, or, assuming that I must be championing the very rules that they had been tormented with as schoolchildren, simply expressed scorn and outrage that anyone could defend such foolishness or wickedness. These critics missed the point—or rather, two points: first, it had never been my intention—or duty—in that article to put forth specific rules (its argument was that linguists had no special authority in matters of usage; my remarks about rules were merely *obiter dicta*); and second, I had in fact given a rather broad hint as to the kind of rules I had in mind when I recommended Graves and Hodge's *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*. But my glancing reference to the notion of rules, to judge by the mail the article provoked, exercised my readers far more than all the rest of my points taken together, controversial though they were.

As if to show that nothing can help one who has started with false assumptions, even the *Oxford English Dictionary* has been pressed into service to support false conclusions, giving us the Fallacy of the *OED*. A recurrent scene from the language-usage wars: A decries a usage by a contemporary, B; C rushes to B's rescue by citing the *OED* to show that the usage is to be found in Beowulf, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Browning.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* has been called, and in many ways is, the greatest dictionary ever compiled of any language. But if we ever needed to be shown that the devil can quote scripture, the uses to which this great dictionary is regularly put would do it. Many users assume that as the "greatest of dictionaries," the *OED* is the greatest of authorities on usage—that is, on how the language should be used. In fact, its greatness and its real usefulness involve its complete renunciation of any claim to authority in that sense. It excels simply as a record of where the language has been; its distinction lies in the fact that it records the earliest use its contributors have found of every sense of every word; that, and nothing more. In doing so, it provides the best available answer to questions of the form, "When did *cattle* start meaning just bovine animals?" and "When did road surfaces start being called *macadam*?" It is no good at all for questions of the form, "Is it okay to use *infer* and *imply* interchangeably?" or "Is it ever permissible to use a plural pronoun with a singular antecedent?"

All the *OED* can tell you in answer to questions of the latter type is, "Well, Shakespeare did it once," or "Browning did it regularly; see 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's' for the earliest example." These statements, while offering possibly interesting information, are not answers to the questions that were asked; all that these non-answers do is replace one set of questions with another: "Does Shakespeare's use of such-and-such a construction authorize me to use it now?" and "What does Browning's use of that locution have to do with my situation?" And

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the answer is that Shakespeare's or Browning's use of some construction or locution has little if anything to tell us about usage today, and for two reasons, either of which would suffice.

First, the authors to whom appeal is being made lived and wrote some time ago, and much has changed since their day: spelling and syntax have been regularized and stabilized by printing, near-universal literacy, public schooling, word-processing programs with spell-checking features, and all the other standardizing institutions and technologies that have in many ways fixed the language. We have decided for virtually every word in the language which of numerous spellings is correct, and we enforce that decision—in the schools with grades, and afterward by privately denigrating and sometimes publicly humiliating those who use a wrong form (former Vice President Quayle may have lost his chance at the presidency of the United States by misspelling *potato*). We are not quite so settled in matters of grammar and usage, but nearly so—settled enough, at least, to make appeal to the practice of writers of as little as a century ago futile and irrelevant. In short, it simply doesn't matter, for purposes of resolving a dispute over usage today, how Chaucer, or even Dickens, said it.

(There is one way in which the practice of yesterday's writers can and should be a consideration in our disputes over current usage: it is good for us to know Shakespeare's usages—that is, to have them in our passive vocabularies—not because his use of them makes them acceptable by today's standards, but because we want to be able to continue to read him with ease. Our delight in Shakespeare is such that those of his usages that would be called errors if employed today are ones that liberally educated moderns should know—but also know enough not to use in their own writing. There is a great difference between those who want to use the *OED*'s Shakespearean citations to defend dubious modern usages and those who want to use them in reading Shakespeare.)

Second, the use to which Shakespeare and Browning (these names are used as examples only, of course) put the language is usually very distant from that to which you are putting it, unless you too are writing poetic drama or dramatic poetry. The use to which language is put in poetry, romances, belles lettres—De Quincey's Literature of Power—is radically different from that in news stories, magazine articles, business reports, scholarly papers, and other nonfiction—De Quincey's Literature of Knowledge; the difference is as great as that between Bernini's use of stone and a mason's use of stone. Even if Shakespeare were our contemporary, then, his use of language—as an art medium—is so different from that of a journalist or academic writer that citing his practice in defense of theirs is ludicrous.

Another error to which *OED* idolaters are prone is that of taking the date of a word's earliest citation in that work as the date of its acceptance into common usage, when it may well be simply the date on which some

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adventurous innovator tried it out, with no one seconding that use for many years after. On the basis of this error, the word in question is then claimed to have been "in use" far longer, or earlier, than the facts warrant, and is deemed to have been a full citizen of the English language when in reality it was still generally unknown, and regarded by most who did know it as an illegal alien. (I owe this point to a suggestion by Jacques Barzun.)

But despite its irrelevance, the *OED* nevertheless plays a big part in the running battle that has long been going on between the "prescriptivists" and the "descriptivists" (as the jingle goes), because the former sometimes succumb to the temptation to support their positions on questions of usage by citing what they suppose to be historical facts. And when they do, they sometimes get those facts wrong, and thus allow the descriptivists to point out their errors triumphantly and make them look silly. The prescriptivist arguing for the preservation of the distinction most good writers of today observe between *disinterested* and *uninterested* may, for example, carelessly claim that it has always been observed by good writers; at this, the descriptivist dives into his *OED*, and emerges to announce gleefully that the prescriptivist is wrong, as indeed he is. The prescriptivists whose pretensions are thus exposed deserve the embarrassment they suffer on such occasions, but that exposure does not refute their position on usage, since that position is not based on linguistic history. In short, being able to write *"OED"* at the end of one's argument is not like being able to write "QED."

The last item in this cavalcade of error is the Fallacy of Linguistic Nihilism. In matters of language usage, as in those of religion, morality, and governance, the theme of our time is one of revolt against authority. Nobody, contemporary man is resolved, is going to tell him what to do—not church, king, parent, community, school, or books. His sovereign will alone will determine what he does and thinks, and as for what his will will will—and why—why, that is no one's business but his, or its, or—well, whatever. I am not concerned here with the effect this doctrine has on other aspects of human life, but its effect on speech and writing has been what one would expect of a determination to saw off the branch on which one sits.

It has made us simultaneously arrogant and servile: we want to be the final judge of how we say our say, but we also want to be correct—we want to do as we please, but we also want our audience both to understand and to respect us. So we demand of our dictionary, for example, that while not daring to tell us explicitly what is correct and incorrect, it should nevertheless guide us to the usage that will achieve our double goal of being understood and being respected. This is rather like demanding that our parents should not restrict us in any way, but should nevertheless protect us from danger, hardship, and embarrassment.

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In questions of language usage, the demand that we shall eat our cake, have it, and not grow fat is especially difficult to meet, because even those of us who are most dedicated to pure willfulness sometimes need to use words that will mean the same thing to others that they do to us. And at least on such occasions we find ourselves wanting to know what is correct (the absence of quotation marks around the preceding word is not an oversight), and we look for the dictionary that we know is around somewhere. But when we find it, our problems are compounded.

Until well into the twentieth century, dictionaries, grammars, and other such guides and reference books were openly and even aggressively prescriptive—they made no bones about telling their readers "This is right" and "This is wrong." Starting about midcentury, however, these authorities lost most of their nerve. The cause of their surrender of authority was twofold: students of scientific linguistics often were successful in undermining their pretensions to exact knowledge (and with it, their self-confidence), and champions of the common man protested any attempt to lay down rules on matters of usage to free-born citizens.

The result is that many books that innocent readers still regard as authoritative are merely chronicles: they no longer profess to offer expert opinions and judgments, they merely record the phenomena. Their authors read the books and articles we write, listen to the speech they hear us utter, and record our usage as closely as possible in their own books, passing no judgment on any of it. So when the innocent reader turns to one of these works for a rule or at least a guide to what he should say or write, he is not consulting an expert, he is merely looking into a mirror.

Sometimes the reader realizes that he is being denied guidance, and complains; more often he doesn't, and takes the presence of some locution in such a book for approval. Thus, he may look into some modern reference books and find that they seem to say that *imply* and *infer* mean the same thing, or that *disinterested* is simply a variant form of *uninterested*, and the like. The reader is mistaken; the compilers of these books are merely saying that they have observed people writing and talking as if those things were true, and that they, the compilers, are not presumptuous enough to call such things wrong.

The immediate problem caused by this abdication of authority on the part of the authors and compilers of such works—an abdication largely unnoticed by the general public—is that naïve readers often think that their questions have been answered when they have in fact only been thrown back at them: they call into the wilderness, "Is it okay to use *imply* for *infer*?" and Echo answers " . . . use *imply* for *infer*." Fun, but not informative. The longer-term problem is that caused by all abdication of authority in the absence of a legitimate successor: it does not mean that we are now free; it means only that a new authority, probably less legitimate and less restrained, will now take over.

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Someone or something is going to determine the way we speak and write; someone is going to make decisions on usage—there is no such thing as a moratorium in language usage any more than in politics. We cannot defer usage decisions while waiting for linguists or anyone else to perform further research; we cannot invent for ourselves a language and a set of rules for using it. We can only choose among authorities, and only among those we know. And if the authorities on usage are not to be the best writers of the recent past and present, and the critics and teachers with whom we study them, who are they to be? Television personalities? Rock stars? Gangbangers? Funeral directors? Gossip columnists? Telemarketing consultants? Or perhaps just Sir Echo, telling us soothingly that whatever we say is fine, just fine?

The linguistic libertine, who wants all the advantages of absolute freedom plus all those of the coddled child, invariably falls into the hands of one or more of the above-listed charlatans, just as children whose parents have refrained from teaching them a code of behavior, so as to allow them to choose one for themselves when they reach their majority, do not in fact remain in moral limbo until then, but join the local gang and adopt its code. When a dog is left masterless, he does not live independently, but joins the local pack of feral dogs and submits to its alpha male.

All these falsehoods and errors, and more, victimize not merely ordinary citizens but also the professional students of language, the linguists. Indeed, the linguists may be even more in thrall to these errors than are the laity.

The scholarly study of language seems to have begun—we are dependent here on such texts and inscriptions as happen to have survived—millennia ago, reaching a very high level by the fourth century B.C. in the work of the Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini in ancient India. But linguistics in the modern sense—linguistics not as grammatical scholarship in the service of religious ritual and the preservation of sacred texts, but as a claimant to the status of science—dates from the late eighteenth century. A convenient starting point is the recognition in 1786 by Sir William Jones of the relationships among Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit that led to the idea of what we now call the Indo-European family of languages. That recognition inspired a century-long effort on the part of linguistic scholars to find other such relationships and families, and the effort bore so much fruit that nowadays the marvel is to find a language, such as Basque, that seems to have no relatives.

These triumphs of learning and imagination, in turn, seemed to establish the claim of linguists to be practicing a science—a discipline dedicated to elucidating the laws that govern an order of nature. And so it seemed, for several exciting decades in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, that linguistics, now founded

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on rock, was taking its place among the true sciences, and could soon be expected to produce the kind of rigorous and illuminating results that the others produced. But although departments and journals of linguistics have sprung up everywhere, the results achieved by what seemed in the early decades of the twentieth century a promising science have been disappointing. No findings even remotely comparable to the triumphs of nineteenth-century linguistics have been made, no great new principles have been formulated, no epoch-making discoveries have been announced.

Linguists have been very busy, but their busyness seems to be about an increasing number of increasingly divergent topics: some are in effect anthropologists, gathering linguistic data from remote peoples, and compiling dictionaries and grammars of languages spoken by small and isolated tribes; some study the minutiae of the grammars of their own or other contemporary languages; some try to find "language universals" among seemingly unrelated tongues; some, following Chomsky, try to find "deep structure" behind language's façade; some create maps depicting the boundaries of various dialectal usages and pronunciations; some try to decipher the remaining fragments of languages that were dead before Troy fell; some study the way in which children acquire language skills, or explore the brain sites that seem to be associated with language acquisition and use; some study the possible linguistic significance of sounds made by whales and apes, or try to teach these animals the rudiments of human language.

All of these investigations and projects have their interest and value, but they give little promise of converging toward a comprehensive and unified theory of language. The only thing that these studies have in common is that they all deal with language in one way or another—and this, it seems clear, is not enough to make them all part of a recognizable discipline. There is no aspect of human life that language is not part of; to take everything language-related for one's domain is to take on too much, to cast one's net too wide. Linguistics has declared no aspect of language alien to itself—and this, while admirably catholic and generous, is fatal to its hopes of being a science.

In another way, though, linguistics is too narrow and selective. While speech and writing are important parts of almost every human activity, they are the whole of very few. Human life is shot through with language as good beef is marbled with fat; and as no edible cut can be without fat, or composed wholly of it, so no humanistic study can either avoid language or deal with it alone. Linguists have tried to carve from reality a cut consisting of all and only the fat, without regard to where the animal's joints are, or to whether the resulting cut can be eaten. It is as if a group of scholars decided to study all and only the things humans do with their left hands, and then claimed for Sinistrics the status of a science.

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A lesser but still serious problem linguists face is one that besets all the human sciences: they are studying creatures who are increasingly aware of being studied, and whose behavior increasingly reflects that knowledge and subverts those studies. We, the tens of millions who have been to college, all own dictionaries and sometimes consult them; we buy books on usage and style, try to develop our vocabularies, and read such writers as William Safire. And while we manipulate and toy with language (with no apology for our ignorance of the goals and methods of linguistic science), linguists try desperately to discern behind all this noise the intrinsic laws of language that they hope and believe are there. One can't help sympathizing with them, however misguided one thinks them, just as one might sympathize with would-be herders of cats.

These I believe to be the reasons why linguistics came up with no triumphs in the twentieth century comparable to those of the nineteenth, and seems unlikely to in the twenty-first. And if they are, the prospects for a science of linguistics are very dim. The language-stabilizing forces and the four types of human language innovation noted at the outset will have their way, and any underlying, purely linguistic laws, assuming they existed, would continue to be as much drowned out by the resultant tumult as would Kepler's laws if every backyard amateur astronomer could manipulate planetary orbits to suit his notions of symmetry. The conditions under which linguistic laws—again, assuming they existed—could be observed are vanishing, if not already gone; it may seem to the linguists that the inmates have taken over the asylum, but it is merely that the guinea pigs are taking over the laboratory. Even in the remotest parts of the earth, it is getting very hard to find naïve subjects to observe; nearer home we have wise guys who are so perverse as to try to turn the tables on the linguists and feed them "observations" fabricated specifically to mislead or embarrass them.

What the future holds, then, for linguists on the one hand, and lay usage arbiters on the other, is divorce—with the latter getting custody of the language. And not only will linguists lose their bid for recognition as usage experts, they will lose their status as practitioners of an autonomous discipline. Linguistics itself will be broken up, and its fragments annexed by its neighboring departments. Some linguistic projects and investigations will be absorbed by anthropology, some by archaeology, and some by ethology; probably the most fruitful projects will be taken over by departments of cognitive development and neuroscience. The good work being done by many linguists at present will go on, but under different auspices, and within different scholarly contexts.

Questions of usage—judgments as to how we should write and speak today—will be recognized as lying within the purview of the general educated public, with philosophers, literary critics, and poets perhaps

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seen as leaders. We, the new usage arbiters, may occasionally turn for assistance to the findings of what is now called linguistics, if we judge such information to be relevant to our own objectives, but if we do, we will be looking not for judicial rulings but for expert testimony on technical points, whose value we will assess by our own lights. We will of course have access to the *OED* and to the works of Saussure and Humboldt and Jakobson and Chomsky and all the rest, but we will regard these great figures as expert witnesses only, and witnesses whose testimony is only occasionally to the point. And in the hands of its most skillful users rather than in those of its academic observers, the language will take on not an independent life, but the dignity and efficiency of a tool shaped and wielded by its proper masters.

For one thing, we should see an end to the use of the "living, growing language" fallacy as an excuse for misuse of the language—meaning not the solecisms that allegedly trouble schoolteachers, but the truly dangerous abuse of building prejudices into the language so as to shut down criticism before it can even raise its voice. The archetypal example of this stratagem is *progressive*, which is now generally accepted, even by conservatives, as the proper name of a loosely defined cluster of *marxisant* views that tacitly awards those views the twin crowns of virtue and inevitability. For such a linguistic manipulation, designed to bypass critical thinking by building a desired conclusion into the language itself, I propose the term *mindshunt*, meaning "a term so tendentious that one cannot use it without at least seeming to take toward the thing denoted the attitude of the term's coiner." (The mindshunt was a well-known stratagem at least as long ago as the middle of the nineteenth century; here is James Fitzjames Stephen, writing in 1862: "Men have an all but incurable propensity to try to prejudge all the great questions which interest them by stamping their prejudices upon their language.")

The full story of what awaits us when linguistics is absorbed into its neighboring disciplines, as geography has been, and when language change is seen not as something that hidden laws impose upon us but as something that we bring about ourselves, can only dimly be seen from where we are—but one thing is clear even now: it will bring greater clarity, coherence, and honesty to our cultural life, as is always the result when a process swathed in mystery is brought into the light, and we begin to understand and take responsibility for our own actions.

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In Defense of Fainting

WILLIAM LOIZEAUX

It's happened any number of times and in any number of unfortunate places, but the one that comes first to mind was during my freshman year at a small college in upstate New York, in October 1971. We all had a science requirement to fulfill, and because I had heard it was easy, I enrolled in a class called Microbes and Man. It met at 10:00 A.M. in a huge lecture hall not far from my dorm.

I was then at the stage—one from which I have still not entirely emerged—when I desperately wanted to fit into the world in which I found myself. I wore desert boots, bell-bottom jeans, and Oxford shirts with tails fluttering out. I wanted to be smooth, smart, and vaguely athletic. I wanted to take life in stride. I wanted to talk casually with sophisticated girls from Long Island and Bronxville who, beneath their white peasant blouses, didn't bother to wear bras.

So there I sat with my cool, nervy dorm mates in Microbes and Man. Two aisles with stairs divided the lecture hall, which must have held two hundred other freshmen, and I was smack in the middle of them, maybe thirty feet from each aisle. I was writing away in a spiral notebook. Amazingly, I still have it. When I recently exhumed it from a box in our basement, I was struck by the neatness of my youthful handwriting and perplexed that at no point did it falter, go haywire, or fade. I can't find a hint of the moment of dissolution that still looms so large in my mind.

The lecture was well under way, I'm sure of that, though I don't

William Loizeaux's nonfiction books are *Anna: A Daughter's Life* and *The Shooting of Rabbit Wells.* He teaches at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Maryland.

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remember what it was about. Maybe typhus, trichinosis, dysentery, yellow fever, or syphilis, all of which had earned the course its unofficial title of Worms, Germs, and Sperms. At any rate, and for no reason that I can figure out, the professor began to describe how cattle were killed in slaughterhouses in the days before the invention of those fancy, high-voltage electric zappers. He said that men would stand on the rungs of livestock pens. One by one, using sledgehammers, they'd strike the cattle between the eyes.

It was probably only a brief digression, but I couldn't get it out of my head. As I kept seeing the burly men swinging their hammers like Reggie Jackson, and saw the wide, dumb eyes of the cattle, each going cross-eyed as the sledge approached its mark . . . as I kept seeing all this, over and over and over, my heart leaped like a squirrel in a sack; I was cold but sweating; my throat was dry; the lecture hall was gray and spinning; and this, considering my immediate surroundings, seemed like the very worst thing: I felt the upwelling of my sausage breakfast and what doctors call, in their peculiar language, "an acute urinary urgency."

But I didn't succumb. Not yet. Not there. I don't usually succumb on the spot. For a moment, something deeply courageous or cowardly kicked in, like adrenaline or turbocharging. I was with my new dormmates. Those girls from Bronxville were somewhere in the hall. Before I'd do something awfully uncool, I had to get out of there.

Still seeing and hearing the bellowing cattle, I scrambled over shins, backpacks, notebooks, and laps, clawing toward the aisle. I got there and staggered up the stairs, falling down while clambering up. I careened out of the hall and bounced off a wall in the lobby, upsetting a plastic potted plant and a framed print of Louis Pasteur. Then I plowed through the doors to the world outside, where all the light went black.

Among doctors, it's called "vasovagal syncope," the most common form of what the rest of us call "fainting." Extreme fatigue, pain, injury, fear, or (my specialty) emotional stress gets the crazy process going. The heart revs briefly; the blood pressure soars. Then the vagus nerve leaps into the fray. That's the long nerve that, in my *Gray's Anatomy,* snakes down from the head and branches out to the larynx, throat, windpipe, lungs, heart, stomach, and pancreas, and, through tiny "efferent fibers," reaches all the way down (significantly, as we shall see) to the lowly sexual organs. It's one of the body's main trunk lines, and its job, like a teacher on playground duty, is to keep things from getting out of hand. When overstimulated, however, like that frazzled teacher, it clamps down hard on all the action. The heart slows to a crawl. Vessels dilate. Pressure plummets. Blood, unpumped, goes where gravity takes it—to your legs and bum if you're standing or seated, and away from your brain. All this can be exacerbated if you're feeling hungry, nervous, or

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stuck in a crowded, stuffy place. Within seconds, your face turns the color of ash, your stomach quakes, your legs go wimbly, and everything sways and fades.

Never a favored form of expression among men, fainting once enjoyed a currency among certain women as a badge of patrician sensitivity. My grandmother, for example, would fall into a swoon, or at least stagger toward the tufted divan, upon hearing bad news or what she called "crude language." But alas, my grandmother is long gone. So too the languid wrist to the forehead; the embroidered handkerchief stuffed up the sleeve; the hand fan whipped out, fast as a switchblade; the smelling salts (in that mysterious little glass phial!) at the ready in the purse. With the women's movement, fainting lost its charisma, its distinction, its charm. Imagine fainting flat out in the boardroom or at a committee meeting. Then imagine being proud of it! It's embarrassing, undignified, and terribly unprofessional, your legs all funny like that.

So who will be the standard-bearer for fainting? Who will celebrate such losses of power and control? Who will stand tall for falling down? Who will even acknowledge it?

The authors of medical studies inform us that about 30 percent of us—equally divided between women and men—have at least felt faint without any underlying illness, and 10 percent of us, at one time or another, have actually hit the deck. Fainting accounts for 1.5 million doctor visits and 160,000 hospitalizations annually. So, in fact, people are still passing out all over the place, though no one seems to want to admit it or to band together in common cause. Where I live, there are hundreds of self-help groups for people with almost any condition or concern, from chocolate addicts to Chihuahua breeders. But not a one for fainters.

To find out about fellow fainters, you could ask your friends very elliptically, or, as I'd suggest, you could start with people you know in the medical profession. They have stories to tell. Nurses, for instance, are always scraping blood donors off floors, often before anyone's rolled up a sleeve. Or they'll tell you about those sensitive fathers who faint in delivery rooms, often draping their helpful, inert selves all over their laboring wives. Then, to prevent anything of the kind from happening again, these same gallant fathers march off to vasectomy clinics, where—voilà!—they repeat the performance as soon as they see the shining instruments. Older men sometimes faint while urinating. This is called "micturition syncope," a particular problem for fainters who pee off boats: they follow their urine seaward. "Heat stroke," a misnomer, is yet another form of fainting, usually involving dehydration. And then there's the case of Michael Lasalandra of Massachusetts, who, while watching *Seinfeld* one night, laughed so hard that he fainted three times. The act of fainting while laughing thereby earned the name—no kidding—"Seinfeld Syncope."

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Another place to find fainters is in the back pages of newspapers, in those little local articles tucked among the furniture ads and cures for baldness. Here you'll discover people who tip over at weddings, Kiwanis dinners, sales meetings—and sometimes at burials, right into the grave. Commuters faint while waiting for late trains, and teenagers at Aerosmith concerts. Opera stars tumble off stages. Usually they're mezzo-sopranos. Kids faint during school, especially around exam time, and after school in airless shopping malls. But our overburdened court system has the largest caseload. At inquests, verdicts, and sentencings, distraught defendants and/or plaintiffs (and I've heard of one lawyer) routinely collapse under the weight of justice.

If it involves a celebrity or other well-known person, a fainting will hit the headlines. On a visit to the California Pavilion at Expo '86, Princess Diana fainted as state officials were showing her what must have been a fascinating bicycle exhibit. "She fell to the floor," California governor George Deukmejian told reporters afterward. Then he remarked on an extraordinary achievement: "She fainted very gracefully."

Such grace was not manifested two years later by ex–Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, now the Baroness Thatcher. In the middle of a speech on a warm day in Santiago, Chile, the baroness suddenly stopped and stared at her notes. Then, say news accounts, her eyes closed, and her face fell on the microphone.

Lest you think that fainting in high office is solely an English phenomenon, consider our recent attorney general, Janet Reno. During her term in office, she swooned at least twice—and neither episode was related to her Parkinson's disease. The first occurred on November 25, 1997, during a law enforcement conference in Mexico City. At a reception, she teetered and was helped to the floor by a staff member—a more or less normal, secular fainting. The second, though, was something else again, as it may have involved the Holy Spirit. On Sunday, September 27, 1998, Reno was standing in the front row of the Full Gospel AME Zion Church in Washington, D.C., holding hands with people on either side. According to the *Washington Post*, the choir had just sung "Lord Lift Him Up," and Reverend John A. Cherry was praying for the country and for the attorney general. His voice rose. People shouted "Praise God!" and "Thank you Lord!" Then, in the words of the *Post* reporter, "There was clapping and swaying as the prayer grew louder, and amid the noise and the motion, Reno slumped down into her chair, her eyes closed and for a moment her body went limp."

By far the most dramatic high-level faint in recent history was performed on January 8, 1992, by President George H. W. Bush. You might remember this one because Japanese television recorded the august event, and it was rebroadcast around the world. Before the toast at a state dinner at the home of Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, Presi-

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dent Bush, with his wife, Barbara, at his side, suddenly turned white and vomited toward a floral centerpiece. Unconscious, he slithered off his chair and came to rest under the table. Security officers sprang to his aid, as did Miyazawa. On the film clip, you can see the Prime Minister crouching with Bush's head lolling in his lap, as Barbara, standing with a napkin or towel in hand, appears ready to tidy up.

Ten months later, in a not unrelated event, the country voted George Bush out of office. Compared with the lusty, faint-free Bill Clinton, the guy with regurgitated food on his tie just didn't have a chance. He was, in a word, a "wimp."

Indeed, just look at the words we associate with fainting. My desk dictionary equates "faint" with "lacking in courage and spirit: cowardly." In the *Oxford English Dictionary,* to faint is "to lose heart or courage, be afraid, become depressed, give way, flag"; to "grow weak or feeble, decline"; "to fall short"; "to droop, sink into." Other synonyms include "sluggish," "timid," "shirking," "lazy." To these my thesaurus adds "fail," "fade," and "impotent." Not a kind word in the lot.

So no wonder fainting has been stigmatized, shunned, and forced underground. No wonder no one will admit to it.

But hold on just a second. Something doesn't compute. Wasn't this teetering Janet Reno the same one who served longer than any other attorney general in history? And wasn't this the same Princess Di who would mobilize world opinion for the prohibition of land mines? Wasn't this waxen-faced George Bush the same one who, confronted with Iraq's aggression in 1990, rallied us to victory in the Gulf War? And wasn't this drooping Margaret Thatcher the same one who, by force, ejected the Argentines from the Falkland Islands, and who also stiffened our resolve against Iraq, declaring, "This is no time to go wobbly!"?

Here I propose a modest theory: that fainting and feats of stamina or heroism are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they go hand in hand, inseparably intertwined. One of the great secrets of civilization is that heroes, too, are fainters. In fact, many have allowed us glimpses of their swooning selves, if we care to look closely.

Take Odysseus. Hardly a wimp—just ask Penelope's suitors. But for all the wounds he can sustain, and for all the arrows he can shoot through a hoop or a man's chest, brave Odysseus is still a fainter. His vagus nerve gets the best of him. In Book V of the *Odyssey,* he sets off from Calypso's island on a raft, heading safely home to Ithaca, he thinks. Instead, Poseidon intercepts him and whips up a huge storm that shatters the raft. For three days thereafter, Odysseus swims toward the land of the Phaeacians. He makes it, barely, and then, according to the Alexander Pope translation, he collapses with all the aplomb of George Bush—though he has the sense to do it out of camera range.

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That moment, fainting as he touch'd the shore,
He dropp'd his sinewy arms: his knees no more
Perform'd their office, or his weight upheld:
His swoln heart heaved; his bloated body swell'd:
From mouth and nose the briny torrent ran;
And lost in lassitude lay all the man,
Deprived of voice, of motion, and of breath;
The soul scarce waking in the arms of death.

How exhilarating to hear fainting described in such lofty and dignifying tones—indeed, in heroic couplets! But there's more. Odysseus soon awakens from his faint, and this is what he finds:

A mossy bank with pliant rushes crown'd;
The bank he press'd, and gently kiss'd the ground;
Where on the flowery herb as soft he lay . . .

Odysseus's world has utterly changed: from tumultuous sea to mossy, kissable bank; from the wrath of Poseidon to the pliant hospitality of Phaeacia, where he will soon be tended by the "blooming" virgin goddess Nausicaa and her bevy of sporting nymphs. With their snowy limbs bathed in ambrosial oil and their shining veils unbound, they feed him, clothe him, and offer to bathe him. They're as fetching as any girls from Bronxville.

Tell me now that fainting is such a bad thing! In a fix you pass out, and when you awaken, you're surrounded by these babes in the woods. You're a magnet for sympathy and soft ministrations, the center of a world that has reorganized around you. For Odysseus, fainting is a door that leads to a bower of renewal, from which he will continue his journey.

Even some of our biblical heroes go rubbery-legged, and others faint outright. "David waxe[s] faint," according to my King James version, when he faces the giant Ishi-benob many years after slaying Goliath. And Daniel, after his disturbing vision of the ram and the goat, hits the canvas before getting up, dusting himself off, and admirably going about his business. Esther, though, is the undisputed champ of biblical swooners—that is, if you read the Apocrypha. With flair, finesse, and exquisite timing, her faints inspire the intervention of God, get her out of a tight jam, and save her people.

Esther is the Jewish wife of King Ahasuerus of Persia. When she hears of Haman's decree to wipe out the Jews, she has the nerve to intercede—unsummoned!—before the king, who sits upon the throne in all his terrifying majesty. Here's how the Apocrypha tells it:

Lifting his face, flushed with splendor, he [the king] looked at her [Esther] in fierce anger. And the queen faltered, and turned pale and

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> faint, and collapsed upon the head of the maid who went before her. Then God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness, and in alarm he sprang from his throne and took her in his arms until she came to herself. And he comforted her with soothing words.

Like Odysseus's, Esther's situation is suddenly and dramatically improved by fainting. God, under full sail, comes to the rescue. The king is made gentle and—responsive, cuddly husband that he's suddenly become—he leaps off his throne to help her.

But it turns out that the king's soothing words still leave something to be desired. He tries to comfort Esther by detaching her fate from that of the Jews: "Take courage; you shall not die, for our law [Haman's decree] applies only to the people"—and not, presumably, to royalty. Yet this, for Esther, just doesn't do. The world hasn't changed enough. So she faints. Again! A double faint! And this one does the whole trick. The once-angry king is now eager to do her bidding. He's in the palm of her clammy hand: "What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request?" he asks as she comes to for the second time. So she induces him to invite Haman to a banquet, thus beginning the extraordinary chain of events that will end with Haman's hanging and the first celebration of Purim.

It is important for fainters to remember this history, especially at times of loneliness and doubt. As they say again and again in those self-help groups: You are not alone! Our individual wobblings, no matter how various, are part of a great ongoing tradition. As brethren, we link limp arms across the centuries: you, me, Odysseus, Esther, and George H. W. Bush. We invoke the names of our forebears. Their stories validate our own. They live in our bones as we clatter down; they are with us when we arise.

And arise we do. Always. That is the wonder of fainting. We ensure our renewal by falling down. It's as simple as gravity, a medical fact. Once you're on the floor, the blood that pooled in your legs and bum rushes home to your brain. The heart quickens. Pressure mounts. Color begins to return to your face. Breathing deepens. Your eyes flutter open, and the world flickers back, a better one than you left.

I could tell lots more fainting stories of my own. Many involve some graphic description of pain or injury to man, woman, child, or beast. Others involve the contemplation of some bodily activity that, at the time, I would rather not have thought about. As a twelve- or thirteen-year-old, for example—a boy forging his way into manhood!—I keeled over at the very climax of a sex education class. And then there was the time I drove to a local hospital to pick up a friend who had just passed a kidney stone. When I entered her room, a doctor was excitedly describing the stone, where it had lodged, and what tricky surgical procedure he'd have performed if it hadn't dislodged. Need I say that I was soon careening down a hallway,

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from wall to wall to metal chair to floor, leading with my face? Need I say that it was I, rather than my friend, who would now require hospital attention? And that it was she who would finally drive me home, while I slumped, bandaged and bewildered, in the passenger seat of my own car?

Here I'll go straight to the mother of all my fainting stories, the one that, in my modest life, most partakes of and extends the great tradition of Odysseus and Esther.

Ten years ago, my wife and I were having difficulty conceiving a child, so on a cold February morning, I found myself in Columbia Women's Hospital in Washington, D.C., in front of a pair of swinging doors with a sign featuring a black microscope above the word *Lab.* In my hand I held a small note from my wife's gynecologist. It contained this simple, declarative, and disquieting sentence: "Perform semen analysis." I drew a deep breath and marched through the doors.

Inside was a waiting room that smelled of antiseptic. Blue vinyl chairs. Glass-topped tables. And the whole place was filled with women—sitting, dozing, peering into magazines or compacts, or standing in line at a receptionist's window, holding small, clear plastic cups of urine that they'd hand to the receptionist, who in turn would pass them to a technician to be analyzed.

There wasn't another male in sight until, as I moved toward the receptionist's window, a man in a pin-striped suit strode through a small white door and cut in front of me. In his hand he had one of those plastic cups, inside of which was some sort of crumpled plastic bag, pinched at the top with a rubber band. In the bag was evidence that he had accomplished what I, too, had come here to do. He held the cup like a glass of Scotch, swirling it to get the ice melting.

When I reached the window, I handed my note to the receptionist with all the apparent nonchalance of the man in the pin-striped suit. The receptionist was a stunning Caribbean woman with ropy dreadlocks and long, lacquered nails. With a Magic Marker, she wrote my name on a cup, placed a rolled plastic packet inside, and handed it to me through the wide slot in the window. With her nails, she directed me toward the door from which the pin-striped man had emerged. "Bring it back here when you're done," she said, as if she had just lent me a screwdriver. So I moved toward the white door, cup in hand, now feeling the first tinglings, the first hints of numbness, along the cool insides of my arms.

But I would do this. For my wife, for our progeny, for us. The door was closed, so I knocked.

"Busy!" someone called from within, as people glanced up from their magazines. Then a moment later a woman emerged, smiling awkwardly, brimming cup in hand.

I walked in briskly and locked the door. It was a small bathroom with no windows. A toilet. A simple shelf and mirror above a sink. The smell of

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bleach. The floor white. The ceiling white. The walls white. Everything white, except for a large, glossy poster on the back of the door that I had just closed. On the poster were directions in five languages and a diagram sparing no detail—all showing how a woman might accurately urinate into a cup like the one I was holding.

It is hard to describe the effect of these things, except to say that they weren't energizing. I put my cup on the shelf. Thinking fast, I sat on the toilet lid, bowed my head, took a few deep breaths, and instructed myself to relax. This was no big deal. Certainly nothing new. Just wait for the mood, take care of business, then walk proudly through the door.

Moving manfully ahead, I got up and took off my coat and sweater. From the cup, I pulled out the packet along with a brief set of instructions. The packet—which was called a "collection pouch"—unrolled in my hand. It was made of clear plastic, heavier than cellophane, lighter than Tupperware, with sharp, singed seams along either side. It was U-shaped, the size of a thumbless mitten, and along with it, "to prevent slippage," came a red rubber band a half-inch thick, the diameter of a nickel, and of no great elasticity.

About this time, I heard a knock on the door, and I managed to call, "Just a minute!" Desperately I tried to focus my mind on snowy limbs and sporting nymphs, but all I could imagine were those women lining up, waiting outside. I stared at the cup, the pouch, and the red rubber band. It was then that my vagus nerve kicked in. All the way down to my loins.

Instantly my shirt was drenched, my legs were cold. In the mirror, my face blanched, white as the walls, which seemed to be shuddering toward me. Everything shrank, yes, everything. Nothing could blossom here. I bolted past the poster, through the door, and out into the waiting room, scattering some women in line. I was staggering now, but I still had a purpose: to get to the receptionist, to give her back my cup. Somehow it was in my hand again, yet with nothing of substance inside. In its emptiness it seemed terribly heavy, and seemed to be pulling me down . . .

I have a better understanding now of what the Apocrypha means when it says that Esther "collapsed upon the head" of the maid who accompanied her. It is a difficult feat, but it can be done. I am here to bear witness. As I groped toward the receptionist's window, cup in outstretched hand, I collapsed upon the head of a seated woman from Reston, Virginia, who was awaiting the results of a pregnancy test. As she told me later, quite generously, "It was only a glancing blow." She was more or less able to shrug me off her wool suit as I slithered to the floor.

I was awakened by a pain behind my eyes and a faraway yipping whimper, like the sound our dog makes during nightmares. But the sound was my own voice. And now there were other voices, gentle voices: "Take it easy. Breathe deeply. Would you like some water? Some juice?"

Across my forehead lay something cool: a damp cloth. Shoes, slacks,

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and hems of skirts wavered into focus. Many women were kneeling around me, an unusual thing in my life. I blinked. At last, Nausicaa's nymphs! Soon I felt a soft hand behind my neck, and I was slowly sitting up. Now a cup appeared before me. This one, however, was brimming with orange juice and crushed ice, and was held by a hand I recognized, that of the receptionist. She was kneeling with her face close to mine, head cocked, dreadlocks hanging, and looking into my eyes with tender concern, as if I had made some noble sacrifice on her behalf.

"You'll be all right," she said. "This will help."

I took the cup, said thanks, and drank it down.

Later, when I was sitting up in a chair and most of the others had dispersed, she said to me in a low voice, "Do it at home. Whenever you want. Then bring it here as fast as you can. Just keep it warm."

Now I know I'm not exactly Odysseus, or the sort who might have saved the Jews, but I did arise from that faint, went home, and the next day returned in triumph to the receptionist's window with the required specimen in a Ziploc bag that I had cleverly kept warm in my armpit. Moreover, my wife and I would soon conceive our first daughter, an event that in turn would lead to more novel swooning episodes. Some months later, the very word *episiotomy*, just the word, sent me reeling out of a birth class. And then during the birth itself, a cesarean section, I recall moments of swaying wooziness, although—wonder of wonders—I stayed on my feet, propped up no doubt by the flow of adrenaline and the three boxes of raisins that I had wolfed down on my way to the operating room.

I haven't slackened since then. Faithfully, I faint once or twice a year, most reliably during visits to my in-laws in Minnesota. Three New Year's Eves ago, for instance, I executed a full George H. W. Bush shortly after the cheese fondue. The following year, wasting no time, I keeled over on the plane heading west. At the gate we were met by my quizzical in-laws and an emergency rescue squad.

If I wanted to, I could probably be "cured" of fainting. Beta-blocker drugs might do it. A pacemaker might do it. Most highly recommended is something called "desensitization therapy" or "exposure therapy," depending upon your specialist. The idea is bravely to "face down your fear"—or whatever stimulus triggers all those awkward, humiliating, and inconvenient sprawlings upon the floor. As they like to say in the therapy literature, now there's "hope for the faint of heart!"

Here's how it works. Say the sight or thought of blood and gore makes you squeamish. Well, there's a program for you. After you've figured out how you'll pay for this, you lie on the couch in your therapist's office with your feet elevated (so it's hard to faint). Then the therapist plays a color videotape of abdominal exploratory surgery. For now, you just lie with your eyes closed and listen. There's the soft *sssssst* of the scalpel drawn

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upon flesh; the click of clamps, retractors, forceps; the swiney snuffle of suction. It isn't pleasant, but you can handle it. So at your next session, your therapist plays the tape again, while you blink cautiously. There's a glimpse of bloodied, marbled muscle, and what Richard Selzer calls the "gleaming and membranous" organs—salmon, yellow, maroon. Now this is getting a little more difficult, so you watch it over and over and over, each time opening your eyes just a little longer, until many sessions and dollars later, you can watch the whole thing, see the rubber-gloved hand weaving among the slick, sausagey intestines, squeezing, hefting, probing. Next you watch it while seated in a semi-upright position, then upright, and then—bravo!—standing. I assume you could move on to other videotapes—open-heart surgeries, frontal lobotomies—and having faced your fear through all these, you might eventually stroll through slaughterhouses or corpse-littered battlefields without batting an eye.

Of course I'm all for "curing" those for whom fainting could be mortally dangerous—sailors, roofers, and tightrope walkers come immediately to mind. But I think I'll stick with my affliction, thank you. All this exposure is not for me. I'd rather not be desensitized.

I guess in this life you eventually have to claim something as yours, some activity that expresses your innermost being, something at which you truly excel. This choice used to be a spiritual matter, involving some attentive listening for your "calling," a sort of simultaneous message from your heart and from the big man upstairs. My phone doesn't often ring with such messages, but I think I'm hearing one now. Fainting is probably what I do best. It is my talent, my essence, my contribution to the world. Perhaps more than any other identity, a fainter is who I am. And perhaps, if you believe the statistics, it is who a lot of us are.

Could it be that fainting is one of those things that proves we are human? Could it reflect some measure of empathy, that quality that at least to some degree distinguishes us from, say, hamsters? Could it be that fainting comes less from a particular weakness than from some hardwired knowledge that we all are weak, terribly pervious, our bodies like rafts on Poseidon's sea, vessels of twine and kindling?

Syncope comes from the Greek word for "pause." In the midst of some situation that keenly reminds us of our vulnerability, we fainters pause. We don't run away, at least not very far; nor do we charge the barricades. We simply stop and, often after some theatrical staggering, go down in a heap. It is not a reasoned act, but it is reasonable: a "cooling-off period," as mediators call it, after tensions have risen to a boil. We take a break. We check out. We trust the ministrations of time.

"Even the youths shall faint," says the Book of Isaiah, ". . . and the young men shall utterly fall." But like those who "wait upon the Lord," we fainters pause, our world and lives renewed. Then we "mount up with wings as eagles."

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KAY RYAN

Still Life, with Her Things

Today her things are quiet
and do not reproach,
each in its place,
washed in the light
that encouraged the Dutch
to paint objects as though
they were grace—
the bowl, the
goblet, the vase
from Delft—each
the reliquary
of itself.

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Tired Blood

Well, not *tired*
so much as *freighted.*
As though foreign objects
had invaded.
As though tiny offices
had dumped
their metal furniture
among the glossy lozenges
and platelets—
chairs that stick together,
painful cabinets.

Kay Ryan's fifth book of poetry is *Say Uncle*.

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Winter Sun

MARTHA COLLINS

Red blue red blue then black
and white through the train
window into my closed eyes.

Open now, wide now. Moving right
along. There, beyond the polished
ice the waving water, tipped

with light, there there, the term
of distance coming close with its
sweet hand, but here we are

again, they've made a scene
outside: wired sky, cut-
out smokestacks, lean tree

with many fingers touching nothing
more than air. A little smoke
but no fire. All stalled.

Gray books, gray paper. I
was missing, nowhere
to be seen, but not heard.

Now the wheels turn again, held
on firm lines gripping the ground.
No fire except this light

that flames eyelids, skin, veins, gold
that touches the gray page and makes
the dust, this dust shine.

Martha Collins, Pauline Delaney Professor of Creative Writing at Oberlin College, is the author of four books of poetry, of which the most recent is *Some Things Words Can Do*.

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The Great Queen Died

CHRISTOPHER CLAUSEN

Humor, G. K. Chesterton announced unexpectedly in 1913, "is the last essential of the Victorian. Laugh at him as a limited man, a moralist, a conventionalist, an opportunist, a formalist. But remember also that he was really a humorist; and may still be laughing at you." The Victorian age had ended, not a moment too soon, a dozen years earlier. Its reputation was already in shreds. To be "Victorian" in 1913 was to be all the things Chesterton listed and some he did not: hypocritical, sentimental, and above all, sexually repressed. A hundred years after the death of Queen Victoria in January 1901, not much has changed. Throughout the English-speaking world, the entire twentieth century, culturally speaking, was a reaction against an era named for and symbolized by a woman who died less than a month after the century began. All that has really been added since Chesterton wrote is a self-contradictory nostalgia for the same period.

People in those days still knew how to count to a hundred. In its issue of January 1, 1901, *The Times* of London hailed the advent of a new century with a series of questions. "The twentieth century has dawned upon us; and as we float past this great landmark on the shores of time feelings of awe and wonder naturally creep over us. . . . What will be the changes the new century will witness? Will they be mainly for good or for evil to the race?" After surveying science and discovery as hallmarks of the modern age, *The Times* returned to its questions, now wondering about the far-off end of the century that had just begun: "Will the last generation of the twentieth century differ very much from the first? Will they be healthier and longer-lived, wiser, better, and more intelligent, or will they

Christopher Clausen, a frequent contributor, is the author of *Faded Mosaic: The Emergence of Post-Cultural America.* He is Professor of English at Pennsylvania State University.

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remain substantially the same as the people we have known and the people whom history has portrayed to us?" The authors wisely attempted no answers. All they would commit themselves to was a general confidence in the future of Britain and the English-speaking world.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the *New York Times* was less restrained. "TWENTIETH CENTURY'S TRIUMPHANT ENTRY!" was the banner headline, followed by the somewhat tautological lead: "The Century is dead; long live the Century! Yesterday was the Nineteenth, today the Twentieth. Sometime last night the one died and the other was born." At City Hall on New Year's Eve, two thousand flags, two thousand electric lights, and a gigantic illuminated sign reading WELCOME, 20TH CENTURY "combined to make the civic capitol gorgeous and win the admiration of the immense crowd," the *Times* informed its readers. Randolph Guggenheimer, president of the city council, delivered an address that praised the century gone by—"The advance of the human race during the past hundred years has not been equaled by the progress of man within any of the preceding ages"—and showed the same modesty about reading the future as his counterparts in London: "The possibilities of the future for mankind are the subjects of hope and imagination."

Guggenheimer's own hopes had to do with what the *New York Times* of today would call social justice: "that the rights of the individual man shall continue to be regarded as sacred, and that the crowning glory of the coming century shall be the lifting up of the poor, the annihilation of all misery and wrong, and that the peace and good-will which the angels proclaimed shall rest on contending nations as the snowflakes upon the land." Inside the paper was an editorial more than a full page long that reviewed the nineteenth century, emphasizing in particular the advance of liberal institutions and the progress of science. Like its London counterpart, the newspaper expressed itself about the future in hopes rather than confident predictions. The effect was similar to that of a man loudly calling a rambunctious new dog of unknown breed for the first time and having no idea whether it will come.

The immediate impact of Queen Victoria's death on her world is inseparable from the fact that it occurred precisely three weeks after these uncertain portents of a new century. She had reigned over nearly two-thirds of the previous one and had come to be associated with an unshakable stability, if only because most of her subjects throughout the British Empire, then at its peak, could remember no other monarch. Her dying so strikingly on schedule—though in the nature of human longevity the event could hardly have been deferred many more years—added immensely to their sense of unease about the future. Together with the almost pharaonic funeral that followed, it was an event worthy to begin a century.

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The Queen performed her last official duty on January 14. It was an audience with the commanding general of British armies in the Boer War, then dragging on in South Africa, and she conducted it from a wheelchair. She was living at her favorite residence, Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, which she and Prince Albert, her idolized, long-dead husband, had built early in her reign. She was eighty-one, and her health had been declining for a year. Two days after receiving Lord Roberts, she was unable to get out of bed. Her doctors quietly notified Albert Edward, the Prince of Wales, that his mother's health was failing and that she could die at any moment. The following day she suffered a stroke.

The first public announcement of her condition appeared on January 19, a Saturday on which, by coincidence, she also became the oldest monarch in English history. Although the medical bulletin was worded innocuously, the combination of these events made the likely outcome clear to most observers. Now the press began to stake out Osborne in what would become a familiar twentieth-century fashion, seeking any word or rumor of the old lady's deteriorating condition. On the same day, the Prince of Wales left London, while Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, Queen Victoria's eldest grandson, left Berlin for what both assumed would be her deathbed. Anxious anticipation was not confined to her family and subjects. It permeated whatever parts of the world the press could reach.

The *New York Times* lead story the next day carried a six-bank headline that bluntly began QUEEN VICTORIA AT DEATH'S DOOR. On the twenty-first, another detailed account, redundantly headed QUEEN VICTORIA SINKING FAST, covered most of the front page. The front page for the following day, on which the Queen in fact died, bore the anticlimactic headline QUEEN VICTORIA RALLIES SLIGHTLY, although the *Times* reassured its readers a little farther down that its previous coverage had not been exaggerated: THE END EXPECTED SOON. Most of the page was filled again with medical bulletins from Osborne, as well as tributes from the capitals of Europe.

The actual death scene that day was Victorian almost to the perfection of stereotype: surrounded by her children (she had borne nine), grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and weeping servants, supported on her right by her chief physician and on her left by the German emperor, the world's four-foot-eleven matriarch flitted in and out of consciousness as a pair of clergymen took turns conducting prayers until she died peacefully at 6:30 in the evening. Immediately all but her family left the room. Fifteen minutes later the new monarch, who abandoned his father's German-sounding name to become King Edward VII, dispatched telegrams to the Lord Mayor of London, the prime minister, and the archbishop of Canterbury. After that the army of journalists waiting outside the gates were told the news and, like reporters in an old movie, stampeded for the nearest telegraph office.

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According to Jerrold M. Packard's account of Queen Victoria's death and funeral, the whole of London went into mourning within minutes. Church bells began tolling in every quarter; nearly every place of entertainment closed, while the Strand and Trafalgar Square filled up with vast, mourning crowds on a wet Tuesday night in January. Once again, this response was not confined to London, or even to the parts of the world over which Queen Victoria had reigned. In Washington, President McKinley immediately ordered that the White House flag be lowered to half-staff, the first time that such an honor had been paid to any monarch. Both the House and the Senate passed resolutions of condolence and adjourned. The fact that Queen Victoria and her husband had helped avert war between Britain and the United States during the Trent Affair of 1861, when Union naval forces had removed two Confederate envoys from a British ship, was repeatedly mentioned with gratitude. As in Britain, the sheer fact of her longevity—eighteen presidents of the United States had held office during her reign—undoubtedly had something to do with the awe at her passing. "I mourn the safe and motherly old middle-class queen, who held the nation warm under the fold of her big, hideous Scotch-plaid shawl and whose duration had been so extraordinarily convenient and beneficent," Henry James wrote to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. "I felt her death much more than I should have expected; she was a sustaining symbol."

Not just in the big cities of the East but throughout the United States there were similar reactions of grief and sympathy accompanied by the slightly queasy feeling that, as the *New York Times* editorialized the next morning (echoing language its London namesake had used three weeks earlier), "one of the most noteworthy landmarks in the world" had ceased to exist. Once again, the newspaper devoted the whole of its front page to the Queen's death and the American tributes. Rather cattily, it wished the fifty-nine-year-old new king well in spite of his "youthful indiscretions," describing him as "eminently a man of the world" while making it clear that the phrase was not, in this case, intended as a compliment.

The Times of London was naturally more discreet, but still gave the impression that no successor could equal the monarch who had been lost. The entire paper was bordered in black. Its first six news pages were devoted to the Queen's life and death. "To write the life of Queen Victoria," it intoned, "is to relate the history of Great Britain during a period of great events, manifold changes, and unexampled prosperity. In reckoning the extent of our debt towards her, we have only to think how differently the course of public affairs might have moved during the last sixty-four years had Victoria been other than she was." After praising her for setting an unequaled example both of family life and of constitutional monarchy, the anonymous author rose to his peroration:

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> To most of us the whole course of our lives as subjects of the Queen has been the proof of the admirable way in which this unique woman—whose small frame was permeated, so to speak, with Royal dignity, whose home life was so simple and pure, and whose intelligence, with none of the brilliancy of her eldest daughter or of her Imperial grandson, was yet formed by work and long experience into a powerful instrument of life—has met the difficulties of the longest and the fullest reign in English history.

Notwithstanding all the changes that had occurred in every area of life, he noted, "Great Britain has remained extraordinarily stable." (It was in fact the only major country in the world that had passed through the nineteenth century without a civil war or revolution.) "Happy are we who have grown up under the shadow of that venerable name! . . . Already it looms large; it will loom larger and larger as the years and the centuries roll on."

The Queen's funeral rites were as lavish as any Victorian could have wished. No fewer than eighteen battleships and twelve cruisers escorted the ornate coffin on its short journey from the Isle of Wight to Portsmouth, where it remained overnight. Tens of thousands of soldiers and sailors accompanied it the next day on its procession through London, where hundreds of thousands of onlookers lined the streets, and then to its final resting place at Windsor. There being in 1901 no CNN, the rest of the world participated by way of memorial services held more or less simultaneously. In Washington, the President and cabinet paid their respects at St. John's Episcopal Church; in New York, some six thousand people had to be turned away from the packed Trinity Church. From Copenhagen to Calcutta, the business of life halted for an hour to mourn a woman whom few people had ever seen, who had (truth to tell) little direct impact on most people's lives even in her own kingdom, and who had died undramatically of old age.

Such extravagant commemoration and commentary would soon have brought their own reaction even if they had not represented the final curtain on an era that some Britons were already eager to repudiate. "The old queen was dead," the historian G. M. Young wrote thirty-five years later. "She had lived long enough. The idol of her people, she had come to press on the springs of government with something of the weight of an idol, and in the innermost circle of public life the prevailing sentiment was relief." What had died, said the Liberal historian and courtier Lord Acton (who would himself die the following year), was "the England of tradition. I am not weeping for it." His friend and correspondent Mary Gladstone Drew found the military aspects of the funeral "distasteful beyond words . . . just now, when our chief peril is militarism."

In many respects, the reaction of the Edwardians—at least the less

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serious ones—to the advent of their own brief time in the sun strikingly resembled the revolt of the 1960s against the 1950s. There was the same unbridled reveling in stereotypes of the previous age, the same self-congratulation on having liberated oneself from repression, hypocrisy, sentimentality, even (for the more serious-minded) from imperialism and the suppression of women by the Victorian family. From now on things were going to be different. Ninety years later, John Paterson, a literary critic, summarized without much irony the outlook of

> the young men and women of middle-class standing who led the brave fight against the old social order and its rules and restrictions. Why should they follow the modes and manners of their parents and grandparents? Why should young women wear formal dress and attend formal dinners and exchange formal speech with formal young men and become in due time their formal young wives? For the war against social decorum was fought even more by the women than by the men. Of course they wanted the vote, the young women of England. . . . But they also wanted to live and be free, to think and create and find their own selves and live their own lives. Indeed, it was more than social freedom they wanted, the more daring among them. It was sexual freedom as well.

How much of this outlook Paterson is projecting onto the Edwardians from a later age is in a way irrelevant, for during the entire twentieth century, middle-class opinion defined itself to a considerable extent in these terms. Formality and all the rest of it were ultimately expressions of sexual repression—if Freud had not existed, any number of people would have invented him. The twentieth-century crusade of crusades was for sexual liberation. In the conduct of that crusade, the image of the enemy was, ironically, always that of a queen who, when told it would be dangerous for her to become pregnant again, complained: "Oh, Doctor, can I have no more fun in bed?" In questions of twentieth-century mores, the most crushing put-down, for either a man or a woman, was to be called Victorian.

"I read constantly that the Victorians did this and the Victorians believed that," G. M. Young wrote, "as if they had all lived within the sound of the town crier's bell, and at all times behaved, and thought, and worshipped with the disciplined unanimity of a city state on a holy day. I ask myself, Who are these Victorians?" But the adjective has been used negatively too long to change its ways. Well before Lytton Strachey's debunking book *Eminent Victorians*—which ridiculed a quartet of idols including the revered Florence Nightingale—was published at the end of World War I, people were already congratulating themselves for not being Victorian. The Victorians, who lived immediately before our century, were everything that we are not. Or, to put it more positively, we are everything that *they* were not.

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The fact that the period called Victorian was so long and various that the reign constituted its only unity is therefore another irrelevance. Every quality we dislike, the opposite of every quality we have or would like to have, is projected backward onto the Victorians. We believe in openness, lack of concealment; therefore they were secretive and hypocritical. We profess to like informality in all areas of life; therefore we emphasize their black woolen suits, their rituals, their decorum. We believe we are tolerant and nonjudgmental; therefore the Victorians must have been unrelentingly censorious. Above all, we have been praising ourselves for ninety years for being sexually liberated. Therefore, whatever evidence may exist to the contrary, Victorians as a species were pathologically repressed. "Confound Victoria, and the slimy inhibitions / She loosed on all us Anglo-Saxon creatures," wrote the American poet Amy Lowell early in the century. More recently, the most enticing brand name an advertising agency could come up with for seductive women's underwear was Victoria's Secret.

A revealing example of the odd dependence of the twentieth century on the nineteenth as a negative source of identity and self-flattery, a reversing mirror, occurs in the study of literature. Victorian writers or literary works singled out for admiration by anyone but hardened specialists are almost invariably described as "modern," more typical of our day than of their own. Until recently, the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins were included in the twentieth-century section of the most prominent anthology of English literature, although Hopkins died in 1889. Arthur Hugh Clough and James Thomson, two less well known poets, are typically praised today as proto-modernists who anticipated T. S. Eliot; they died respectively in 1861 and 1882. The novels of George Meredith, the social writings of William Morris, the Alice books of Lewis Carroll are all wrenched out of their embarrassing historical context and admired for being ahead of their time. That is to say, they anticipated *us*.

Except when used in a purely chronological sense, the word *Victorian* still has overwhelmingly negative connotations a full century after the tiny woman who inspired it went to her grave at Windsor. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, itself one of the most durable and impressive Victorian intellectual monuments, offers in its 1989 second edition this definition: "Resembling or typified by the attitudes supposedly characteristic of the Victorian era; prudish, strict; old-fashioned, out-dated." It is a common part of growing up to rebel against one's parents and their values. To go on for a hundred years rebelling against what are now one's great-great or even great-great-great grandparents is unusual, even unprecedented. The reaction against the Victorians has now lasted half again as long as its namesake reigned and, to judge by the number of times President Clinton's impeachers were contemptuously denounced as Victorian, shows no signs of ending. No other historical period has ever obsessed its immediate

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successors to such an extent. So strong a reaction constitutes an immense, if backhanded, tribute to the power of that which is being repudiated with such limited success over such a long period of time.

With her complaint about militarism, Mary Gladstone Drew made a prophetic point about the Victorians, fairly or not, that would echo through the century, though she could not have accurately foreseen the event that would give it such resonance. The two most famous English memoirs of World War I, Robert Graves's *Good-Bye to All That* and Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, begin with their subjects' nearly identical earliest recollections: the celebrations of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. Because the memory and consequences of the Great War cast such a blight over the entire European twentieth century, its outbreak separated history into two parts—before and after—far more decisively than did 1901.

After the great divide of 1914–18, the Jubilee represented infancy, safety, a mythical time of almost Edenic wholeness before the Fall that was the focus of immense nostalgia. But it also represented the heritage of those who had brought on the calamity. Inevitably, the men in power everywhere in 1914 had grown up before 1901 and were, if only in a limited chronological sense, Victorians. For some young survivors of the war, the Victorian era—symbolized by their own earliest memories—therefore had two extremely powerful and opposite meanings. Vera Brittain expressed this ambivalence at its most transparent: "If only the comfortable prosperity of the Victorian age hadn't lulled us into a false conviction of individual security and made us believe that what was going on outside our homes didn't matter to us, the Great War might never have happened."

Logically it made no sense to reproach the Victorians, who had managed to avoid great wars, for blunders made more than a decade after Queen Victoria's death, let alone to blame them for being comfortable and prosperous. The rigid alliances and foolish decisions that led to war mostly postdated her reign. But if one begins by imposing such strong feelings on what is after all no more than a lengthy and diverse succession of years, such misjudgments are likely to occur. In any event, as Richard Altick summarizes postwar attitudes, "It was the late Victorians' bungling of the art of geopolitics and their monumental stupidity, complacency, and shortsightedness which had condemned Britain to an exhausting conflict, as grossly mismanaged on the home front as in the theaters of war. Whether or not the Victorians deserved to be the scapegoats, the familiar fallacy which governs the human mind in such circumstances made it virtually inevitable." Because old Victorian men seemed to be responsible for slaughtering millions of the young—Wilfred Owen compared the war in a famous poem to Abraham's rejecting the ram and

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sacrificing Isaac—the Victorian age stood forever indicted. Because it was also the golden age before the slaughter, it simultaneously became an irrecoverable object of longing. On the whole, that is how our memory of the Victorians continues to operate.

Long before 1914, however, even before 1901, the Victorian age was gone. The nineties of Oscar Wilde and John Singer Sargent had no more in common with the central Victorian fifties than any other two decades forty years apart. Chesterton thought that turn-of-the-century imperialism, which would soon help precipitate the cataclysm, represented a decisively post-Victorian impulse: "The world was full of the trampling of totally new forces, gold was sighted from far in a sort of cynical romanticism: the guns opened across Africa; and the great queen died." His tone was regretful, for he took Victorian seriousness seriously and respected it; but he had no doubt that it was as dead as Victorian humor.

At least one eminent intellectual had forecast the twentieth century's anti-Victorian reaction as long ago as the 1880s. "One thing is pretty certain," wrote Leslie Stephen, the father of Virginia Woolf, "and in its way comforting, that however far the rage for revivalism may be pushed, nobody will ever want to revive the nineteenth century." Despite the negative associations the twentieth century heaped on its predecessor, we have already seen that Stephen was wrong. After 1918, when the sky had fallen, nostalgia for the ninety-nine years of relative peace and security that began with Waterloo and ended at the Marne vied with scorn at Victorian repressions in a collective psychological conflict so powerful that it still goes on. As the plot and title of A. S. Byatt's best-selling 1990 novel *Possession* imply, even the end of the twentieth century remained haunted by its forebear. The lush nineteenth-century images of *Masterpiece Theatre* and the supercilious caricatures of Lytton Strachey coexist as warring apparitions in the great-grandchildren of the last Victorians.

The age itself and the widow who gave it its name still refuse, in some odd sense, to behave as though they were dead. Victoria's last private secretary wrote in his memoirs: "Never in her life could she be confused with anyone else, nor will be in history. Such expressions as 'people like Queen Victoria' or 'that sort of woman' could not be used about her." Twenty years into the century, even Strachey paid grudging tribute to the "sincerity" that, he concluded, was the source of her lasting power over the imaginations of others. "She moved through life with the imposing certitude of one to whom concealment was impossible—either towards her surroundings or towards herself. There she was, all of her . . . she had nothing more to show, or to explain, or to modify; and, with her peerless carriage, she swept along her path." She who was not amused is having the last laugh.

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Fragment

JUDITH ROBBINS

Fittingly
"Fragment" is the first whole poem
(on p. 23 of *Pictures from Brueghel*
and other poems by William Carlos Williams)
that remains intact.

I found the remains this morning
in a pine grove out back, half-hidden
by needles and winter leaves.

Was it mice chewed
the torn white pages
unglued and wedded to earth by snow—

black words on white paper
imprinted and numbered page by page
the cover spattered and torn

in pieces, leavings of insects and God-knows-
what-else lay or burrowed into this text,
looking for protection Williams

didn't factor in. In "Fragment"
he writes

as for him who
finds fault
may silliness

and sorrow
overtake him
when you wrote

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you did not
know
the power of

your words

Did he understand the power
of his own to attract—

to be carried somehow from my writing house
to this grove by unseen
hand—or claw on paw
of a heaving creature
longing for what it couldn't name?

But Williams could
in the section *and other poems,*
growing lichen and pressed together
in a damp community of words.

I decided the creature was larger than mouse—
the arc of its bite, three quarters of an inch
with a delicate edge as of pinking shears
small shears to be found in a house
built by a writer of children's books
and piercing pp. 23 through 45,

47 reduced to one tooth mark
just on the edge, making it less than perfect.

But who can speak of perfection now?

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Spots of mold purplish to gray
like those on the forehead of late middle age
mottle the upper half of 47.

Only the start of part III, *To all the girls*
of all ages
who walk up and down on

the streets of this town
silent or gabbing
putting—

only this is without blemish.
"Perpetuum Mobile," Williams called it
and well he might have
his living text resurrected from soil

no less than Christ, giving life
(perpetuum mobile) not only to girls
but to the whale above in "Histology,"
to the sumac in "Exercise . . . " that died,
as well as to the unnamed creature
who hauled it away.

And I? I found the text
missing since fall.
I've brought into my house
to translate the signs.

Judith Robbins is a freelance proofreader and editor, and an occasional preacher, in southeastern Maine. Her poems have appeared in *Puckerbrush Review, Dudley Review*, and the *National Catholic Reporter*, among other publications.

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Elvis Movies

MARK FEENEY

"We have to think of giving the maximum enjoyment to the maximum fans and the best way to do this is by making films, which can be seen by millions."
—Colonel Tom Parker, Elvis Presley's manager, explaining to Brian Epstein, the Beatles' manager, why his client had given up performing

"Shoot the Hollywood camera!"
—Elvis Presley, aiming his guitar, riflelike, during the filming of the 1970 documentary *Elvis: That's the Way It Is*

Like Gaul, the career is divided into three parts: Memphis Elvis (the singer), Hollywood Elvis (the movie star), and Vegas Elvis (the sacred monster). The Memphis period lasts from 1954, when he made his first recording, until 1958, when he entered the army. The Hollywood period begins with his return to civilian life in 1960 and ends in 1969, with the release of his last theatrical film, *Change of Habit.* That same year, Vegas Elvis emerges full-blown with his record-setting engagement on The Strip at the International Hotel (now the Las Vegas Hilton).

The division is more suggestive than exact. Elvis lived in Memphis much of his life, did nearly all of his studio sessions elsewhere, and recorded music right up until his death. He made his first four movies while still in his Memphis phase and played Vegas as early as 1956. Still, this schema conveys the essential trajectory of Elvis's career: from sexy rock 'n' roll revolutionary in the 1950s to bloated, bespangled legend in the 1970s, with the tame tepidity of his thirty-one theatrical films coming in between. The great paradox of Elvis's career is that the man who did so much to trigger "the sixties" spent that decade on the sidelines in Holly-

Mark Feeney, a reporter for the *Boston Globe*, is at work on a book about Richard Nixon and popular culture.

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wood cranking out three movies a year: "their specious, monotonous 'youthfulness,'" as David Thomson has written, "so wholesome, so bouncy, and so riotously clean," standing in flaccid contradistinction to everything the sixties represented.

When the U.S. Postal Service held its contest in 1992 to decide which image to put on the Elvis stamp, Memphis Elvis and Vegas Elvis were the contenders. No Hollywood Elvis, and rightly so: the movie period is the black hole of Elvis's career. Even his two years in the army produced the pent-up excitement of awaiting his discharge. Nothing, though, is seen as redeeming the Hollywood years. Even the final period, with its Vegas-ized Fat Elvis, had its own garish integrity, adding to the vernacular the phrase "Elvis has left the building" and demonstrating that the pure products of America go very crazy indeed when they perform in rhinestone jumpsuits and white scarves. There's no comparably resplendent egregiousness to the movies, no thrill of excess. They're flat, mechanical, *bored.*

Yet Hollywood Elvis lives on, surviving in the back aisles of video stores, during weekend afternoons on UHF television channels, in a handful of scenes that even people who've never seen an Elvis movie somehow know (cavorting with Ann-Margret in *Viva Las Vegas,* sliding down a pole during the title production number in *Jailhouse Rock*). Then, too, there are the imponderable might-have-beens. Elvis idolized James Dean and Marlon Brando (when he bumped chairs with Brando in the MGM commissary in 1957, he was so starstruck he nearly fell over), and coveted the title role when a Dean biopic was being developed during the late 1950s. Robert Mitchum sought Elvis to play his younger brother in *Thunder Road.* Frank Capra wanted him to play a rock singer turned demagogue for a movie to have been called *The Gentleman from Tennessee,* which sounds like an intriguing (if potentially dreadful) blend of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, A Face in the Crowd,* and *Wild in the Streets.* Jerry Leiber, who cowrote "Hound Dog" and "Jailhouse Rock," proposed a musical for Elvis based on Nelson Algren's *A Walk on the Wild Side,* to be scripted by Budd Schulberg and directed by Elia Kazan. For the 1976 musical version of *A Star Is Born,* Barbra Streisand offered him the Norman Maine part—which in the end went to Kris Kristofferson—but Colonel Parker wouldn't let Streisand have top billing.

Such possibilities bear sad witness to the fact that Elvis didn't have to appear in just "Elvis movies," those formulaic monuments to cinematic inanition, full of females, fistfights, forgettable songs—and little else. These films, Greil Marcus has lamented, "are so tacky no one else could get away with them—and still make money." Alas, Elvis's presence guaranteed an audience; and all his movies did make a profit, even with the lucrative deal that the Colonel demanded from producers after his star's return from the army: $1 million up front and a third of the net. With their balance sheet provided for in advance, the studios didn't exactly

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overspend when it came to production values, as an endless parade of lapses in continuity, brightly lit day-for-night sequences, and painfully obvious rear projection makes grimly plain. Given a license to print money, why oil the presses? As Leiber said, explaining why he and his partner, Mike Stoller, ceased involvement with Elvis movies after his fourth picture, *King Creole,* "It was just going to be like the last one, every movie the same. . . . We could have made fucking history, and those assholes only wanted to make another nickel the same way."

Elvis is the classic example of a star who makes movies but is not really a movie star. Johnny Weissmuller, Sonja Henie, Mario Lanza, Audie Murphy: they made lots of movies that made lots of money, but today they seem more silly on the screen than glamorous. Their careers weren't built on the movies; they were built on swimming or skating or singing or soldiering. At the height of their popularity, their movies were more successful than those of many "real" movie stars; yet they have no true place in movie history (except for Weissmuller, who, as the totemic Tarzan, owes his niche to the role he played—and the yell he gave—rather than to any persona he attained).

As a presence in the American psyche, Elvis has no show-business rival; yet his movie career, while certainly a part of his fame, was more a tribute to his popularity than a major contributor to it. If anything, his movie acting seems like a detour from what being Elvis was all about: a tycoon's investment that barely broke even. Yet his screen presence is such that, clearly, Elvis could have been a real movie star. Think of his foremost vocalist-predecessor in Hollywood, Bing Crosby. *He* made the transition. For all that Crosby is second only to Louis Armstrong in his influence on popular singing in the twentieth century, he is now remembered more as movie star than as crooner. Singers are already halfway there, being required by their craft to express emotion, as athletes—or even dancers—never are. Given a longer leash from the Colonel, surely Elvis could have attained true movie stardom. Consider how much better fared Dean Martin, Elvis's idol when he was starting out. Martin got to work with Howard Hawks, on *Rio Bravo,* and with Vincente Minnelli, on *Some Came Running* and *Bells Are Ringing;* the best Elvis ever did was Michael Curtiz, on *King Creole,* and Don Siegel, on *Flaming Star* (not surprisingly, they are Elvis's most interesting pictures). Siegel, for one, admired Elvis's "sensitivity as an actor," writing in his autobiography, *A Siegel Film,* that Elvis "could have become an acting star, not just a singing star."

Elvis's film persona in the 1960s, Ethan Mordden has observed, belongs to "Old Cinema in a New Age; it cuts the unique down to acceptable size. Even the most rebellious of kids can be enlisted on the side of the traditions and the pieties and the cautions." In *Jailhouse Rock,* his third

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film, it's as if Elvis dances on the grave of the movie musical: Pandro Berman, who oversaw the Astaire-Rogers pictures at RKO, produced it, and the studio was MGM, home of the Freed unit, that last bastion of all singing, all dancing in Hollywood. Yet a decade later, in *Speedway,* there's Elvis in an honest-to-goodness old-fashioned production number. No go-go dancers or kids on the dance floor, no attempt to account naturalistically for why these people are singing and dancing (in, of all places, an Internal Revenue Service office). Suddenly, a roomful of men in suits bursts into song and dance, like a road-show production of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying.* After the song, "He's Your Uncle, Not Your Dad," Elvis gives the supreme demonstration of his preternatural deference to authority: he agrees with the IRS when it docks him for back taxes, and disallows several deductions even before the auditor does. It's hard to imagine being more on the side of the cautions.

Norman Taurog, the director Elvis worked with most frequently, was Old Cinema with a vengeance. He made nine Elvis movies, and although he doesn't merit an entry in either Thomson's *Biographical Dictionary of Film* or Andrew Sarris's *The American Cinema,* he directed seventy-five films (the best-known is *Boys' Town*) during the course of a four-decade-long career. He even won the Academy Award for Best Director, in 1931, for *Skippy.* (He also directed Mario Lanza's film debut, *That Midnight Kiss*—it was as close as a director could come to preparing for Elvis.) Taurog felt as Siegel did—"I think he could have been a good dramatic actor"—but shrugged off any responsibility for Elvis's failure to do so, blaming "the powers at MGM and Colonel Parker [who] always wanted him in lighter films surrounded by pretty girls." Taurog might also have named Hal Wallis, who first signed Elvis to a movie contract and produced nine of his films. In his autobiography, *Starmaker,* Wallis nicely illustrates Mordden's Old Cinema/New Age dichotomy. Of Elvis's screen test he wrote: "I felt the same thrill I experienced when I saw Errol Flynn on the screen. Elvis, in a very different, modern way, had exactly the same power, virility, and sexual drive. The camera caressed him." Yet in person, "I knew him only as a happy, modest, clean-cut American boy." It's that latter Elvis we almost exclusively get in the movies. Aside from the occasional karate chop, Errol Flynn (let alone his wicked, wicked ways) is nowhere to be seen.

There is no such thing as a good Elvis movie, but there are differing degrees of badness. The early ones tend to be less bad, the later ones worse (by then, not even Elvis was disguising his ennui). The early ones at least try to be movies—say, up to *Blue Hawaii,* in 1961, the first picture in which travelogue supersedes storytelling. There's some sense of narrative drive and freshness of plot, and the casting at least wastes some rather good actors. Elvis is still raw in these pictures, still rebellious and surly,

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still (thankfully) undomesticated. Hollywood as yet feels the need to defer to what we might call, for lack of a better term, Elvis's *Elvisness. Loving You* gets him banned in Texas; Elvis is "the one with the jumpin' beans in his pants," an admiring female fan declares. In *Jailhouse Rock* and *Wild in the Country,* he kills people (albeit unintentionally) with his bare hands. His Danny Fisher in *King Creole* is a borderline delinquent, far more familiar with Bourbon Street dives than with classrooms. Yet he's never truly wild in any of these films—not even in *Flaming Star,* a Western in which he plays a half-breed with an untamed streak. The sole concession the later films make to Elvis's animal vigor is a general weakness for speed: fast cars (*Viva Las Vegas, Speedway, Spinout*), fast aircraft (*It Happened at the World's Fair, Kissin' Cousins, Paradise Hawaiian Style*), fast boats (*Girls! Girls! Girls!; Easy Come, Easy Go; Clambake*), fast motorcycles (*Roustabout*).

It seemed to have been a unanimous opinion among Elvis scriptwriters that, when not singing, he was good only for girls and cars (or something else with an engine in it), as if he were the ultimate teenage boy. That kind of condescension is there from the very start of his film career. The converse of his tending to play bad boys early on is that he brings out the maternal instinct—and rather more—in older women. It's as if Hollywood is trying to seduce away his energy and innocence. The roster of older costars who become smitten with him is a litany of love's labor's lost youth: Lizabeth Scott in *Loving You,* Carolyn Jones in *King Creole,* Hope Lange in *Wild in the Country,* Lola Albright in *Kid Galahad,* Sue Ane Langdon in *Roustabout,* even (blush) Joan Blondell in *Stay Away, Joe.* Elvis appeals to older males, too, albeit in an uncomplicatedly filial way. As Wendell Corey, his bandleader-boss in *Loving You,* tells him, "You're the kind of boy any man would be proud to have as a son." He is always careful to address his elders as "Mr." or "Ma'am," and Elvis's favorite cinematic monosyllable is neither "cars" nor even "girls," but "sir."

Even so, the business of being a son is problematic in Elvis movies. It's the changeling theme: there's often something irregular about his ancestry. Either he has no parents, and this eats away at him (*Loving You, Jailhouse Rock, Kid Galahad, Roustabout*), or a parent is dead (*Love Me Tender, King Creole, Wild in the Country*), or he's unofficially adopted into a family other than his own (*Blue Hawaii, Girls! Girls! Girls!*). In Hollywood's conception of Elvis, he's not quite normal—not least of all in the nuclear family's vague antipathy to him. It's as if he must remain somehow apart, untethered, almost parthenogenetic. He's like an alien—the man who fell to Hollywood, the singer from another planet—and that feeling increases as his career continues. Everything in an Elvis movie is so unnatural, so weightless (perhaps only an alien could suspend the law of gravity?). No lasting ills can befall him, no deep emotion touch him. A cutie

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kissed, a fistfight fought, some minor financial obstacle surmounted . . . and off he goes into the wild blue yonder of his next movie, whatever it may be called, whichever studio (usually MGM or Paramount) has won the right to crank it out.

Yet Elvis the alien can also seem like the only real human up on the screen, as if (to reverse the metaphor) he were surrounded by replicants. Partly, that's a function of budget—none of Elvis's producers ever overspent on casting—and an awful lot of nonentities got to play an awful lot of negligibly written parts (Elvis, at least, got to play Elvis). *Spinout* is the locus classicus of Elvis-movie low-budget familiarity, its cast a veritable sixties-sitcom heaven, with Bill Bixby (*My Favorite Martian, The Courtship of Eddie's Father*), Gale Gordon (*The Lucy Show, Here's Lucy*), William Schallert (*The Patty Duke Show*), and Carl Ballantine (*McHale's Navy*).

There are ringers among the replicants, though, as many cherished faces from Hollywood's Golden Age crop up throughout the canon—presumably, they came cheap. Perhaps the only consistent pleasure that watching Elvis movies affords is catching sight of a James Gleason (*Loving You*), Paul Stewart (*King Creole*), William Demarest (*Viva Las Vegas*), Frank McHugh (*Easy Come, Easy Go*), Glenda Farrell (*Kissin' Cousins*), Blondell (*Stay Away, Joe*), Billy Barty (*Roustabout* and *Harum Scarum*), Regis Toomey (*Change of Habit*), and, surpassing all, Barbara Stanwyck (*Roustabout*)—surely, no fifty-seven-year-old of either sex has ever looked better in a pair of jeans. Less often, one also happens upon budding careers: Michael Murphy (*Double Trouble*), Dabney Coleman (*The Trouble with Girls*), Kurt Russell (*It Happened at the World's Fair*). The Russell casting comes with a footnote attached: sixteen years later he would earn an Emmy nomination—and shed the juvenile image gained from too many Disney movies—playing the title role in the 1979 made-for-television movie *Elvis*.

The Elvis canon has one axiomatic principle: respectful, respectable hedonism (a.k.a. good, clean fun). Yet that principle subsumes two recurring themes: class resentment and multiculturalism. The former is the less surprising, as the rebelliousness once displayed toward social mores is now simply redirected at highbrows and college boys. This class consciousness gets its most pointed treatment in *Roustabout,* where Elvis performs a song called "Poison Ivy League," whose chorus begins, "Poison Ivy League, poison that Ivy League / Gives me an itch, those sons of the rich." Only twice does he play a rich boy (*Blue Hawaii* and *Clambake*), and in both cases he chafes at his wealth, attempting to break free and make it on his own. It's not just pride, it's also vanity: nearly all the women in the Elvis movies, regardless of whether older or younger, are his social betters. Independence and disdain are his sole defense against the appearance of being a kept man. A prime example of Elvis's class

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resentment comes in his dealings with social worker Hope Lange in *Wild in the Country.* Here, as throughout the canon, the character is a sort of Everyman (Elvisman?), average in his behavior and tastes, unusual only in his talent. Inspecting a Klee reproduction hanging in Lange's study, he speaks for good old boys everywhere when he asks "Do you think this is art?" He's just as emphatic six years later in *Easy Come, Easy Go.* Pursuing a pretty bohemian, he encounters a bunch of beatniks (or "those kooks," as he calls them) conducting a happening. It's "like a smash-up in an Italian restaurant," complains a perplexed Elvis.

Elvis the cultural obscurantist is balanced by Elvis the racially enlightened. This unexpected facet of Elvis movies goes much deeper than the liberal guilt of late-fifties, early-sixties Hollywood, with its self-congratulatory placement of the occasional African-American-face-in-a-crowd shot. To be sure, there's the completely gratuitous casting of Olympic decathlete Rafer Johnson as a lawyer in *Wild in the Country.* What's far more characteristic is Elvis's frequent—and, more to the point, utterly matter-of-fact—dealings with members of other races and the implicit message of racial comity his movies send. (The very fact that Elvis movies seem so distant from any sixties concerns underlines that this wasn't merely an aping of then-current political fashion.) Elvis is half Native American in *Flaming Star*—and suffers grievous prejudice as a result—and fully so in *Stay Away, Joe. Fun in Acapulco* has him befriending a quartet of Mexican musicians. He's semi-adopted into a Chinese-American family in *Girls! Girls! Girls!,* and in *Blue Hawaii* has a half-Hawaiian girlfriend and sings with an all-Hawaiian band. In *It Happened at the World's Fair,* Elvis spends much of the movie caring for a little Chinese-American girl whose guardian has disappeared. In *Paradise Hawaiian Style,* this motif of cultural diversity receives its most prominent treatment: one of Elvis's former girlfriends is Asian; his best friend and business partner is of Hawaiian descent and is married to a Caucasian. Unfortunately, any blow for enlightenment is undercut by the casting of a Japanese-American (James Shigeta) as the Hawaiian partner—to the filmmakers, apparently, they all really *do* look alike.

Of course, who might have been expected to notice the difference? Elvis is the Sun King of his canon, he around whom the oeuvre orbits and whose celestial presence blots out all else on the screen. The filmmakers' fundamental disrespect wasn't displayed toward Asians or Pacific Islanders, but rather toward Elvis himself. With their rote, assembly-line badness, the Elvis movies turned their star—the most cataclysmically consequential entertainment personality of the century—into Danny Kaye with a libido, a lower-rent version of such other "brand-name" comedy stars of the 1960s as (in descending order of budget) Doris Day, Jerry Lewis, and Don Knotts. It's as if Sea World put Moby Dick on display in a tub of bubble bath. Nor was all this lost on Elvis himself, as he makes plain on

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his 1968 television "comeback" special, which contains by far the best work he did for either large or small screen. "I got news for you, baby," he tells a musician laughing at his expression (the trademark flared nostril, cocked lid, and half sneer), "I did twenty-nine pictures like that."

Alas, Elvis knew perfectly well what Hollywood had done to him—what he had acquiesced in Hollywood's doing. Elvis's self-awareness, like that of a condemned man who serves as his own executioner, is depressing to contemplate. It's even more depressing when you realize that that self-awareness on display in the comeback special didn't keep him from making two more pictures.

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The Library of Robinson Crusoe

ALBERTO MANGUEL

Iron-jointed, supple-sinew'd, they shall dive, and they shall run,
Catch the wild goat by the hair, and hurl their lances in the sun;
Whistle back the parrot's call, and leap the rainbows of the brooks,
Not with blinded eyesight poring over miserable books.
—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Locksley Hall*

On one of the early days of October 1659, after being cast ashore on the coast of what he called "the Island of Despair," Robinson Crusoe returned to the wreck of his ship and managed to bring ashore a number of tools and various kinds of food, as well as "several things of less value," such as pens, ink, paper, and books. Of these books, a few were in Portuguese, a couple were "Popish prayer-books," and three were Bibles. Crusoe's "dreadful deliverance" had left him terrified of death through starvation; the tools and the food met his material needs. *"Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral"* ("First comes the fodder, then the morals"), Brecht was later to remark. So, his body looked after, Crusoe set out to nourish his mind from the ship's meager library. Robinson Crusoe was the founder—the reluctant founder—of a new society. And Daniel Defoe, his author, thought it necessary that at the beginning of a new society there should be books.

We, the readers (compulsive creatures that we are), consider it obvious that, searching for bare necessities, Crusoe would rescue the ship's books, whether in Portuguese or in any other language; we are also tempted to guess what the "several Portuguese books" might have been. No doubt a copy of Camões' *Lusiads,* a fitting book in a ship's library; perhaps the writings of the illustrious António Vieira, including the wonderful "Ser-

Alberto Manguel is the author of *A History of Reading* and, most recently, *Reading Pictures.*

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mon of Saint Anthony to the Fishes," in which Crusoe might have read a defense of the brothers of Friday; most certainly the *Peregrination* of Fernão Mendes Pinto, which tells of strange voyages through the still-mysterious Orient and which Crusoe's author, the omnivorous Defoe, knew well.

We can't, however, tell precisely what those books were, because in spite of keeping a diary that dutifully recorded changes of weather and mood, Crusoe never did more than mention the books he brought onto his island. Perhaps, if his British author believed that English was the only language a gentleman required, Crusoe was unable to read Portuguese. But imagine our despair, had we found ourselves in his goatskin shoes, having at our disposal volumes of literature in a script that we couldn't decode; imagine flicking through the tongue-tied pages, willing the sense to come to us through the twenty-odd letters we know so well, yet set out in a meaningless arrangement that lent the page the quality of a nightmare. Poor us! Poor Robinson Crusoe! But of this calvary, which would be foremost in the mind of every one of us, his hypocritical readers, he tells nothing. (In fact, very soon Crusoe seems to have forgotten his books entirely; when he leaves the island on June 11, 1687, and makes a detailed list of his possessions, he doesn't breathe a word about those enigmatic volumes.)

He does tell, however, of his uses of the Bible. The Bible is at the core of this new human society: it colors each of Crusoe's actions, it dictates the meaning of his sufferings, it is the instrument through which he will try, Prospero-like, to make a useful servant out of Friday. Crusoe writes: "I explained to [Friday], as well as I could, why our blessed Redeemer took not on Him the nature of angels but the seed of Abraham, and how for that reason the fallen angels had no share in the redemption; that he came only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, and the like." And Crusoe adds, with disarming frankness: "I had, God knows, more sincerity than knowledge in all the methods I took for this poor creature's instruction."

The book is an instrument of instruction; the book is also an instrument of divination. Some time later, sunk in despair, Crusoe tries, like Job, to understand his condition. "Why has God done this to me? What have I done to be thus used?" He opens the Bible and finds this sentence: "I will never, never leave thee, nor forsake thee." Immediately he realizes that these words are meant for him. On that faraway coast, starting over again with a few odds and ends from society's ruins—seeds, guns, and the Word of God—Crusoe constructs a new world at whose center the Holy Bible shines its fierce and ancient light.

One can live in a society founded on the book and yet not read, or one can live in a society where the book is merely a prop, and be, in the deepest, truest sense, a reader. As a society, the Greeks, for instance, cared little for books and yet, individually, they were great readers. Aristotle, whose books (as we know them) are probably lecture notes

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taken down by his students, read widely, and his own library is the first in ancient Greece about which there is certain information. Socrates, who despised books and never deigned to leave a single written word, chose to read the speech of the orator Lycias rather than hear it recited by the enthusiastic Phaedrus.

But I believe that Crusoe would have chosen to be told the text. Crusoe, the representative of a book-centered Judeo-Christian society, was not a reader as we, in our so-called literate society, are readers. Crusoe (even though he "read daily the Word of God," as he tells us himself) was not even a *keen* reader of the Bible, the book that lay at the center of his life, his Book of Power (to borrow Luther's phrase). Crusoe would consult it daily, as he would have consulted the Internet had it existed, and would have allowed it to guide him. But he did not make the Word his, as Saint Augustine insisted we must do, incarnating the written text. He merely accepted society's word for it. Had Crusoe been shipwrecked at the end of our millennium, it is easy to imagine him rescuing from the ship not the Book of Power but a PowerBook, which is not an instrument for reading but merely a tool for writing and research.

What distinguishes Crusoe from Defoe, his author and assiduous reader, both inhabitants of the society of the book? What distinguishes a reader of books from someone for whom a book is merely powerful or prestigious? Or rather: What distinguishes the importance of words rescued through the act of reading *from* the prison of the page from the Word unread but revered *in* the prison of the page? There is an unbridgeable difference between the book that tradition has declared a classic and the book (the same book) that we have made ours through instinct, emotion, and understanding: suffered through it, rejoiced in it, translated it into our experience, and (notwithstanding the layers of readings it accreted before it came into our hands) essentially become its first discoverers. This is an experience as astonishing and unexpected as finding Friday's footprint on the sand. "The songs of Homer," declared Goethe, "have the power to deliver us, if only for brief moments, from the fearsome load with which tradition has weighed us down over many thousands of years." To be the first to enter Circe's cave or hear Ulysses call himself Nobody is every reader's secret wish, granted over and over, generation after generation, to all who open the *Odyssey*. This modest *jus primae noctis*, or "first night rights," ensures for the books we call classics their only useful immortality.

There are two ways of reading the much-quoted verse of Ecclesiastes: "Of making many books there is no end." We can read it as a mirroring of the words that follow—"and much study is a weariness of the flesh"—and we can shrug at the impossible task of reaching the end of our library; or we can read the first clause as a jubilation, a prayer of thanks for the bounty of God, so that the connecting "and" reads as a separating "but."

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Crusoe chooses the first reading; Aristotle (and Saint Jerome and Erasmus and León Hebreo and Sor Juana and Dr. Johnson and Northrop Frye) choose the second. Beginning in some lost afternoon in Mesopotamia, every reader has found ways of picking his or her way through the library of infinitely "many books," in spite of the "weariness of the flesh." Every reader has found charms by which to secure possession of a page that, by magic, becomes as if never read before, fresh and immaculate, all previous readings now incorporated into the very atoms of the text. The history of reading is, in some sense, the story of those charms.

At the other extreme from Crusoe—the man who venerates the Book but doesn't read the books, who accepts the verdict of tradition but is not moved to peer between a book's closed covers—sits the reader for whom every book is always open to criticism. Discipline, not pleasure, dictates this reader's craft. He finds occupations in the seats of academia and the office of the censor. For this hypersensitive soul, no text can be taken at face value. In fact, no text can be taken at all, unless expurgated and purified, sometimes to the point of destruction.

One evening in 1939, in Buenos Aires, the writers Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, and Silvina Ocampo decided to immortalize this punctilious reader. They composed, in his honor, the following list (according to Bioy Casares, very much tongue-in-cheek) of the "Things Literature Must Avoid":

> Psychological curiosities and paradoxes: murders through kindness, suicides through contentment.
>
> Surprising interpretations of certain books and characters: The misogyny of Don Juan, etc.
>
> Twin protagonists too obviously dissimilar: Don Quixote and Sancho, Sherlock Holmes and Watson.
>
> Novels with identical twin characters, like *Bouvard and Pécuchet.* If the author invents a trait for one, he is forced to invent a trait for the other.
>
> Characters depicted through their peculiarities, as in Dickens.
>
> Anything new or astonishing. Civilized readers are not amused by the discourtesy of a surprise.
>
> Idle games with time and space: Faulkner, Borges, et al.
>
> The discovery in a novel that the real hero is the prairie, the jungle, the sea, the rain, the stock market.
>
> Poems, situations, characters with which the reader might—God forbid!—identify.
>
> Phrases that might become proverbs or quotations.
>
> Characters likely to become myths.
>
> Chaotic enumeration.
>
> A rich vocabulary. Synonyms. *Le mot juste.* Any attempt at precision.
>
> Vivid descriptions, worlds full of rich physical details.
>
> Background, ambiance, atmosphere. Tropical heat, drunkenness,

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the voice on the radio, phrases repeated like a refrain.

Meteorological beginnings and endings. Pathetic fallacies. *"Le vent se lève! Il faut tenter de vivre!"*

Any metaphors. Particularly visual metaphors. Even more particularly, metaphors drawn from agriculture, seamanship, banking (as in Proust).

Anthropomorphism.

Books that parallel other books. *Ulysses* and the *Odyssey*.

Books that pretend to be menus, photo albums, itineraries, concerts.

Anything that might inspire illustrations. Anything that might inspire films.

The extraneous: domestic scenes in detective novels. Dramatic scenes in philosophical dialogues.

The expected. Pathos and erotic scenes in love stories. Puzzles and crimes in detective stories. Ghosts in supernatural stories.

Vanity, modesty, pederasty, no pederasty, suicide.

At the end of this reader's demands lies, of course, the absence of any literature.

Happily, most readers fall between these two drastic extremities. Most of us neither shun books in veneration of literature, nor shun literature in veneration of books. Our craft is more modest. We pick our way down endless shelves of books, choosing this or that for no clear discernible reason: because of a cover, a title; because of something someone said or didn't say; because of a hunch, a whim, a mistake; because we think we may find in this book a particular tale or character or detail; because we believe it was written for us; because we believe it was written for everyone except us and we want to find out why we have been excluded; because we want to learn, or laugh, or forget.

I have been talking about reading as if the different aspects of this craft were invariable. Perhaps, up to a point, they are. In Mesopotamia as in Greece, in Buenos Aires as in Toronto, readers and nonreaders have existed side by side, and the nonreaders have always constituted the vast majority. Whether in the exclusive scriptoria of Sumer or medieval Europe, whether in eighteenth-century London or twentieth-century Paris, the number of those for whom reading books is of the essence is very small. What varies, I think, is not the proportions, in very general terms, between these two groups of humanity, but the way in which different societies regard the book and the art of reading. And here the distinction comes into play again between the book that is enthroned and the book that is read.

If a visitor from the past arrived today in our civilized cities, he would certainly be surprised by the reading habits of his future brethren. What would this ancient Gulliver see? He would see vast commercial temples in which books were sold by the thousand, immense edifices with such names

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as Borders or Barnes & Noble, in which the published word would be divided and arranged in arbitrary categories for the guided consumption of the faithful. Here the gastronomic vocabulary developed to describe the art of reading ever since the angel ordered Ezekiel to eat the heavenly book has acquired physical reality, and readers sip coffee and chew on cake as they devour trashy novels and scholarly tomes, gossip magazines and learned journals that lament the death of the book. He would see libraries, with readers still wandering among the stacks or among the half-mutated virtual collections into which some of the books have been converted. Outside, too, the visitor would find a host of readers: readers on park benches, readers in the subway, readers on buses and trams and trains, readers waiting at airports, readers sitting in restaurants with books open before them. Inside apartments and houses (our visitor has piercing vision) he would see readers in bed and readers on the toilet, readers in armchairs by crackling fires and readers sprawled on the floor, legs in the air. He may be excused if he supposes that ours is a literate society.

On the contrary! We are not a literate society. Our society accepts the book as a given, albeit an antiquated staple. But the act of reading, once considered useful and prestigious, if not dangerous and subversive, is now condescendingly accepted as a pastime that lacks efficiency and contributes little to the common good. As our visitor would eventually realize, reading here is nothing but an ancillary act, and the great repository of our memory and experience, the universal library, is considered to be less a living entity than a cumbersome storage room—a superfluous storage room, because it contains nothing but the past.

During the student revolts that shook the world in the late 1960s, one of the slogans addressed to the lecturers at the University of Heidelberg was *"Hier wird nicht zitiert!"*: "No quoting here!" The students were demanding original thought; they were forgetting that to quote is to continue a conversation from the past in order to contextualize the present. To quote is to make use of the Library of Babel; to quote is to reflect on what has been said before. Unless we do that, we speak in a vacuum where no human voice can make a sound. "To write history is to cite it," declared Walter Benjamin. To write the past, to converse with history, was, as we know, the humanist ideal, the ideal that Nicholas of Cusa first put forward in 1440. In his *De docta ignorantia* (On learned ignorance), he suggested that the earth might not be the center of the universe and that outer space might be infinite rather than bounded by divine decree; he also proposed the creation of a semi-utopian society that, like the universal library, would contain all mankind, a society in which politics and religion would no longer be disruptive forces. It is interesting to note that, for the humanists, there is a correlation between the suspicion of unbounded space that belongs to no one and the knowledge of a wealthy past that belongs to all.

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This is, of course, the precise opposite of the World Wide Web. The Web defines itself as a space that belongs to all and precludes a sense of the past. There are no nationalities on the Web (except, of course, for the fact that its lingua franca is English) and no censorship (except, again, that governments are finding ways to ban access to certain sites, a censorship by omission). The past (the temporal tradition that leads to our electronic present) is, for the Web user, inhabited by no one. Electronic space is (apparently) frontierless. Sites—that is to say, specific, self-defined locations—are set up on it but neither limit nor possess it, like water on water. It is quasi-instantaneous; it occupies no time except the nightmare of a constant present. All surface and no volume, all present and no past, the Web aspires to be (advertises itself as) every user's home, where communication with every other user is possible at the speed of thought. That is its main characteristic: speed. The Venerable Bede, lamenting the brevity of our life on earth, compared it to the passage of a bird through a well-lit hall, entering from the darkness at one end and exiting through the darkness at the other. Our society would interpret Bede's lament as an act of boasting.

The life of a disk is about seven years; a CD-ROM lasts about ten. Virtual collections, where they exist, must be backed up several times. A few years ago, in the Archeological Museum of Naples, I saw, held between two plates of glass, the ashes of a papyrus rescued from the ruins of Pompeii. It was two thousand years old; it had been burnt by the fire of Vesuvius, buried under a flow of lava—and you could still read the letters written on it as clearly as a page of today's newsprint. The new media, on the other hand, are of the moment, straddling, thanks to their audio and writing functions, the electronic traditions and the traditions of the book. Eventually (one can only hope) they will free themselves from both, developing their own, technology-specific vocabulary. To read the whole of *Crime and Punishment* or *Gone with the Wind* on a computer screen or downloaded on a Rocket eBook is hardly a relaxing business, since no ordinary person can sit for hours in front of an illuminated screen behind which scrolls a text made of flickering dots. And readers of books on CD-ROM (now reserved mostly for reference works) must be submitted to the humiliation of being led through a story as if they were children, requiring a guiding voice or pretty moving images. To demean a CD-ROM, so full of possibilities, to the mere function of an ancient codex, albeit illustrated and read aloud, is to ignore its richness—it's like using a jet plane to drive down the street to the mall. This misuse, I believe, will not last long: only until the artists take over the new medium and grant it its own vocabulary, as artists did with the invention of photography, radio, cinema, video. Only then will we realize that a CD-ROM is not a book, just as a photograph is not a painting. Until that moment, its function will hover somewhere between chatting and leafing.

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One other failing: the Web is not universal. Only the richest societies possess it. For millions of human beings on this planet, the Web is as inaccessible as the universe's farthest moon.

We who do possess it, however, think of it as all-reaching, and speak of it as if it will replace every other technology, including printed books. North American publishers today assume that at least 30 percent of a future book's projected sales will be electronic. Our future paperless society (defined by Bill Gates in a book, I wish to point out) may be global, but it is certainly not cosmopolitan, since it can be no one's home: no one can actually inhabit a Web site. But a paperless society can increase the already gargantuan profits of the multinational companies that own and maneuver in this virtual space. Not only do they control the systems that allow these sites to exist, encroaching on the written patrimony of the world, but they are now purchasing our iconographical inheritance as well. The figures on Achilles' shield and the ever-unweaving picture on Penelope's tapestry would, if fashioned today, be subject to a corporate fee. Corbis, a company Gates founded in 1989, has acquired reproduction rights to many works in the collections of the National Gallery in London, the Barnes Foundation, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Hermitage, and the Far Eastern collection in the Royal Ontario Museum. Other companies acquiring massive iconographical rights are Disney, CNN, Steven Spielberg's Dreamworks, Bertelsmann, Sony, and Conrad Black's Hollinger International Inc.

On January 18, 1949, an American by the name of James T. Mangan filed a charter with the Cook County Recorder of Deeds, and under the state attorney's authority claimed ownership to the whole of space. After giving his vast territory the name of Celestia, Mr. Mangan notified all countries on earth of his claim, warned them not to attempt any trips to the moon, and petitioned the United Nations for membership. Mr. Mangan's ambitious enterprise has now, in a more practical sense, been taken over by the multinational corporations. Their methods have been extraordinarily effective. By offering electronic users the appearance of a world controlled from their keyboards, a world in which everything can be "accessed" and everything can be had, as in fairy tales, by a simple click of the mouse, these companies have ensured that, on the one hand, users will not protest against being used themselves (since they are supposedly "in control" of cyberspace) and that, on the other hand, users will be prevented from learning anything profound about themselves, their surroundings, or the rest of the world. This sleight of hand is achieved by stressing velocity over reflection and brevity over complexity, by preferring snippets of news and bytes of facts to lengthy discussions and elaborate dossiers, and by diluting informed opinion with reams of inane babble, ineffectual advice, inaccurate data, and trivial information, made attrac-

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tive with brand names and manipulated statistics. The fastidious Florence Nightingale once declared that "to understand God's thoughts we must study statistics, for these are the measure of His purpose." They are also the measure of the unholy purpose of these ever-encroaching corporations.

But the Web is not to blame for our lack of interest in exploring the past or for our superficial concern with the present. Its virtue, as I've said, is in the brevity and multiplicity of its information; it cannot also provide us with concentration and depth. The electronic media assist us in a myriad of practical ways, but not in all. A computer will not be the container of our cosmopolitan past, like a book, because it is not a book and will never be a book, in spite of the endless gadgets and guises invented to force it into that role. Nor will it lend us bed and board in our passage through this world, because it isn't a resting place; it is neither a foreign country nor a home, it is neither Circe's cave nor Ithaca. We alone, and not our technologies, are responsible for our losses, and we alone are to blame when we deliberately choose oblivion over recollection. We are, however, adroit at making excuses and dreaming up reasons for our inabilities.

The Abenaki Indians of North America, for instance, believe that a special group of deities, the Oonagamessok, presided over the making of petroglyphs, and they explain the gradual disappearance of these rock engravings by saying that the gods were angered by the lack of attention accorded to them since the arrival of the whites. The petroglyphs of our common past are fading not because of the arrival of a new technology but because we are no longer moved to read them. We are losing our common vocabulary, built over thousands and thousands of years to voice and help and delight and instruct us, for the sake of what we take to be the new technology's exclusive virtues. Virtues they may be, but they are not exclusive. The world, as Crusoe discovered, is large enough always to accommodate one more marvel. In this sense, being a cosmopolitan today may mean being eclectic, refusing exclusion. Our tendency to build walls is useful only in providing a starting point for self-definition. Those walls contain the bed in which we are born, in which we dream, we breed, and we die; but outside them lies Siddhartha's realization that all human beings grow old, all are prone to nightmare and disease, and all must ultimately come to the same mortal end.

Our existence flows, like an impossible river, in two directions: from the endless mass of names, places, creatures, stars, books, rituals, memories, illuminations, and stones we call the world, to the face that stares at us every morning from the mirror; and from that face, from that body that surrounds a center we cannot see, from that which names us when we say *I,* to everything that is Other, outside, beyond. A sense of who we are individually, coupled with a sense of collective citizenship in the inconceivable universe, lends something like meaning to our lives—a meaning put into words by the books in our libraries.

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I am convinced that reading will survive as long as we persist in lending words to the world that surrounds us. So much has been named, so much will continue to be named, that in spite of our foolishness we will not give up this small miracle that allows us the ghost of an understanding. Books may not change our suffering, books may not protect us from evil, books may not tell us what is good or what is beautiful, books will certainly not shield us from the common fate of the grave. But books grant us the possibility of these things, the possibility of change, the possibility of illumination. It may be that there is no book, however well written, that can remove an ounce of pain from the tragedies of Ireland or the Middle East, but it may also be that there is no book, however foully written, that does not allow an epiphany for its destined reader. On page 162, Robinson Crusoe writes this: "It may not be amiss for all people who shall meet my story to make this just observation from it, viz., how frequently in the course of our lives, the evil which in itself we seek most to shun, and which, when we are fallen into it, is the most dreadful to us, is oftentimes the very same means or door of our deliverance, by which alone we can be raised again." This, of course, is not Crusoe speaking, but Defoe, the reader of many books.

Histories, chronologies, almanacs offer us the illusion of progress, even though, over and over again, we are given proof that there is no such thing. There is transformation and there is passage, but whether for better or for worse depends on the context and the observer. As readers, we have gone from learning a precious craft whose secret was held by a jealous few, to taking for granted a skill that has become subordinate to principles of mindlessness or efficiency, and for which governments care almost nothing. We have gone from one to the other many times, and will no doubt do so again. We can't be spared from this erratic course, which seems to be an intrinsic part of our human nature, but we can at least sway with the knowledge of our swaying and with the conviction that, at one point or another, our craft will once again be recognized as of the essence. The library of Robinson Crusoe was (or rather, should have been) not merely an idol or a prop but his new society's essential tool.

The apostle Paul (the only apostle not to have known Jesus face-to-face) would boldly say to those he encountered, men and women seeking the Scriptures, "Do you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me?" He knew that because he had read the Word, the Word was now lodged inside him, even if he had not met the Author; that he had become the Book, the Word made flesh through that little bit of the divine which the craft of reading allows to all those who seek to learn it. This is the wisdom of the Essene sect, the devout people who gave us, so many centuries ago, the Dead Sea Scrolls: *We know that the body is corruptible and the stuff of which it is made, impermanent. But we also know that the soul* (and I, their future reader, will interject, "the book") *is immortal and imperishable.*

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A Long Time Between Murders

OWEN HARRIES

For the last sixteen years I've lived in Washington, D.C., a city in which a half-dozen murders in the course of a weekend are not uncommon. For the first sixteen years of my life I lived in a community that witnessed only one murder in more than a quarter century.

That singular event happened nine years before I was born; but in a Welsh mining village where the oral tradition remained strong, it was still being talked about when I was a boy, with an appalled fascination and a loving attention to detail. Looking back, I can see that as murders go it was rather commonplace—not the kind of thing that would get the attention of an Hercule Poirot or an Inspector Morse—but as it was the only murder I knew, and as it had happened only two doors away from where I lived, the killing haunted my imagination.

It happened on the Saturday night of February 12, 1921, in the only chain store that Garnant boasted. The Star Supply Store—a rather upmarket grocery and general provision establishment—had closed its doors at 8:30, and the staff of five assistants had departed. The manager—one Thomas Thomas, a slightly deaf, frail, and elderly man—had stayed on to empty the till and balance the books. The till contained £128 and change—something between five and six hundred dollars at the then going rate of exchange, and equivalent to perhaps thirty times that amount today. (Here, and in the following paragraphs, memory of the story has been supplemented by the report of the inquest in the *Amman Valley Chronicle and East Carmarthen News* of March 10, 1921.)

At about 10:15, a woman walking past the store heard a scream and

Owen Harries is the editor of the *National Interest*.

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the sound of running footsteps inside the shop. It was a winter's night, and she had three small children with her, so she did not stop to investigate or raise the alarm, later explaining that she had assumed one of the assistants might have cut himself with the bacon-slicing machine, something that had apparently happened before. The light burned in the shop all night and several people—including my young parents-to-be, on their way home from an evening at the pictures—remarked on it. But no one did anything.

The next morning someone did investigate, and Thomas Thomas was found dead behind a counter in a pool of blood. He had been stabbed in the throat and kidneys, his head had been smashed, and—in a macabre touch—his false teeth lay beside him embedded in a lump of cheese, meant apparently as an improvised gag.

In an era when murders were quite rare, the event was nationally newsworthy. The accepted explanation, almost certainly correct, was that it was a robbery gone wrong. The manager must have seen and recognized the intruder, and theft had turned to murder. Scotland Yard, then at the height of its reputation for infallibility, was called in, but before its agents arrived on the scene, the local constabulary thought it appropriate to tidy things up. By the time they had finished washing away the bloody mess, all obvious clues had been obliterated.

The murderer was never found. There was, though, some vigorous hypothesizing in the village. The clear favorite among the suspects was the man with whom Thomas, a bachelor from outside the valley, lodged. There was some plausible supporting evidence. For one thing, the landlord's behavior, as described in the inquest, might have been considered strange. He said that on the night of the murder, shortly before midnight, he had gone out of the house and looked across the valley to see the light still on in the Star Supply Store, but, no, he had not thought it odd enough to investigate. Even later, at about 1:00 A.M., a second lodger at the house, concerned that Thomas had not returned home, had suggested that they walk over to the store (an easy ten-minute stroll) to see whether he was all right. The landlord had declined.

Another thing that told against him in local opinion was that the murder weapons—a boning knife and a broomstick—had been found in a field midway between the store and the lodging house. True, the field was also between the store and dozens of other houses. But any mitigating effect that such a consideration might have had was more than balanced by a third and decisive strike against the landlord.

He was not Welsh. He came from London and, in a community full of Joneses and Morgans and Williamses, he went by the exotic name of Thomas Cooper Mount-Stephens. God knows what had brought him to Garnant, a community that was over 90 percent Welsh, where the Welsh language was the normal mode of discourse, where many of the non-Welsh

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(apart from the vicar and Mr. Mount-Stephens) were either Irish laborers or Italian ice-cream makers, and which was almost entirely working class.

In any case, in a closely knit community of four thousand or so, where everyone knew everyone else and the chapel ethic was strong, having an unknown murderer in its midst must have been exceptionally disturbing—and having an outsider who could plausibly be blamed for the act a source of considerable relief. But, as I say, nothing was ever proved. Apparently, Mount-Stephens and his wife emigrated to Australia not long afterward. Whether they did so out of guilt or to escape unfair persecution, at this distance there is no way of telling.

For perfectly good reasons, most Americans know little about Wales. Insofar as they think of it at all, they probably do so as the home of a few well-known poets, actors, and singers. The best way of placing my home village, then, may be to say that it is situated about twelve miles north of Swansea, where Dylan Thomas grew up and wrote most of his early and better poems, and some sixteen miles northwest of Port Talbot, where Richard Burton and Anthony Hopkins first saw the light of day. (Garnant itself, incidentally, is where John Cale—musical prodigy, avant-garde pianist and composer, ex-drug addict, and member of the rock band Velvet Underground—was born and spent his childhood.)

The Garnant of those days was situated on two important boundaries. Linguistically, it was on the line that separated Welsh- and English-speaking Wales. To its west and north, Welsh speaking was general (though of course virtually everyone also had a working knowledge of English); to the south and the east, use of the native language diminished rapidly. (Dylan Thomas, along with nearly everyone else of his generation in Swansea, never learned to speak Welsh, though both his parents had the language.)

This cultural divide was closely associated with a second, economic one. Garnant was on the very edge of the South Wales industrial basin. A compact area of about fifty by thirty miles, that basin was for a few decades before and after the turn of the century one of the world's great industrial regions, ranking with western Pennsylvania and the Ruhr. It produced vast quantities of coal, steel, copper, tin, zinc, and nickel. In the first decade of the century, the rate of immigration into the area was the highest in Europe, and by 1913 a quarter of a million men worked in the coal mines alone.

At the time of the Star murder, Garnant had four mines producing the hard, brilliant anthracite of the western coal field; and within a five-mile radius there were a dozen other mines. It also had two tin-plate works. But at the same time, Garnant was only barely included in the industrial zone. If you faced north and walked a couple of miles over the Black Mountain, you were immediately in unsullied countryside—the lush dairy country of the vale of Towy and Gwynfe. In the latter stood the splendidly

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dramatic castle of Carreg Cennen, set high on a limestone cliff in a landscape that had hardly changed since Owen Glendower laid siege to the fortress in the fifteenth century.

Garnant's own makeup reflected this border status. The serenity of the curving hills coexisted with the huge pyramids of coal waste that dotted the valley. While the streams coming down from the hills were still pure, the main river—the Amman—was thick with coal dust and was the color and texture of India ink. Only an incredibly resilient species of small eel survived in it. The tall smokestacks of the tin-plate works threw their shadows over meadows that in summer were strewn with daisies and buttercups. How green was my valley? Roughly, about 60 percent.

At the time of the murder, South Wales in general and Garnant in particular were coming off decades of sustained prosperity. In 1913, when coal was still the world's source of power for railways and ocean fleets and factories, the region accounted for about a third of the world's coal exports. The village bore evidence of this prosperity. Indeed, that Garnant had a Star Supply Store as the site of a murder provided such evidence, for this was a reputable middle-class chain—a sort of regional Sainsbury's—that operated through the western part of Britain. The chain would have opened a branch in a mining village only on evidence of significant prosperity and anticipation of rapid growth. (Motivated by the same considerations, my father opened a shop there in 1913, describing his establishment on the promotional pencils he ordered as that of a "Draper, Mercer and Men's Outfitter.") In 1910, a local speculator was optimistic enough to build a shopping arcade to celebrate the coronation of the new king, George V.

Prosperity had continued through the Great War and its immediate aftermath, but by the early 1920s, signs that things were about to deteriorate seriously were evident throughout South Wales. The huge Royal Navy fleet had switched from coal to oil. The fact that other nations were developing their coal industries and that the payment of German war reparations was made in the form of coal meant the loss of markets. Worst of all, some of the best Welsh coal seams were worked out, the mines were undermechanized and stupidly managed, and the cost of production was becoming uncompetitively high.

In most of the Western world, the 1920s were a boom decade, and the Depression didn't begin until the crash of 1929; but in South Wales, things went bad much earlier. The anthracite area experienced a serious and violent strike in 1925. Thousands of miners marched through the Amman Valley and clashed head-on with the massed ranks of specially imported police. Fifty-eight miners, including the father of one of my closest friends, went to jail (to be greeted in due course by brass bands when they were released). The following year, the same miners took part

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in the General Strike, staying out much longer than workers in other industries. Nothing did much to alleviate conditions, and it slowly became clear that this was not a cyclical downturn but the beginning of a permanent and irreversible decline.

By the time I was five, two of Garnant's mines and both of the tin-plate works had closed, never to reopen. A few years ago, looking at a book on the interwar years published by the University of Wales Press, I found only one reference to Garnant in the index: in March 1937 it had registered an official unemployment rate of 57.5 percent. Even for the Great Depression, this is a depressingly impressive figure.

The coal industry revived briefly during World War II, and initially there were high hopes when it was nationalized by Clement Attlee's Labour government in the late 1940s. But those hopes were misplaced. In 1957 the last pit closed in Garnant, and by the end of the 1980s, an industry that had within living memory employed a quarter of a million men had to all intents entirely ceased to exist.

In a community in which work was the central experience, the thing by which men defined themselves, one might think that such an unemployment rate would have had shattering consequences. It would have been reasonable to expect utter demoralization, social breakdown, widespread crime and violence.

To a remarkable extent, none of this happened. Despite real and prolonged suffering—that badge of optimism, the Coronation Arcade, became a slum dwelling place and the location of the labor exchange, where men lined up to collect the meager dole—Garnant not only held together but showed great resilience and vitality. There was little crime and, apart from the occasional drunken fight on a Saturday night, no violence. Property was safe, and down through the war years the murder in the Star remained the only one on record.

Even more remarkably, the thirties were years of robust cultural activity. Choirs gave their regular concerts of *Judas Maccabaeus* and the *Messiah*. The Welsh cultural events known as *eisteddfodau*—involving singing, poetry recitation, harp and piano playing—were well attended. The local brass band participated in regional competitions. Variety concerts—in which, without irony, unemployed miners sang songs like "I'm Burlington Bertie, I Rise at Ten-thirty," or tap-danced, or played the accordion, and women with lovely voices sang popular classics—were held regularly. Young people, including my sister, competed in nationwide Welsh play competitions put on by Yr Urdd Gobaeth Cymru, the Welsh Youth League. The local rugby club, Amman United, was as active and successful as it had ever been, and one of its products, the crash-tackling Claud Davey, went on to captain the celebrated Welsh national team that beat the great New Zealand All-Blacks in 1935.

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It was, in brief, anything but the kind of community of despair and disintegration that is depicted in much Depression literature. How to explain this resilience? Partly, I think, it was a matter of size, the fact that Welsh industry was carried on in small, discrete communities rather than in one great sprawl. Social transactions were direct and personal, anonymity virtually impossible, and a sense of responsibility and compassion strongly developed. These communities were perfect examples of what the sociologist Robert Nisbet described as "small in scale but solid in structure . . . [that] respond, at the grass roots, to fundamental human desires: living together, working together, experiencing together, being together."

The qualities of responsibility and compassion were reinforced by the strong radical tradition of the region, one characterized much more by ethical convictions than by economic or social theorizing. Politically, that tradition expressed itself through the Labour Party, and Garnant belonged to a parliamentary constituency that consistently returned its Labour M.P. with the largest majority in the whole of Britain. For many years that member was James Griffiths, a cabinet minister in Attlee's government and onetime chairman of the British Labour Party. He was an effective and emotional orator with Welsh audiences, fond of coming up with portentous sayings like "God made the hand, but Man made the fist." (An interesting sidelight on the culture: this eminent man's brother was caretaker and cleaner at the local grammar school—and also a distinguished Welsh-language poet.)

At ground level, the radical tradition was most effectively represented by the unions. It was their modest financial contributions, and the voluntary work of their members, that provided the Workmen's Hall, which served as cinema and concert venue, as well as the reading room and library and snooker tables—all of which contributed substantially to making the long, idle years bearable.

Even more important in maintaining the resilience of the community was the strength of two other institutions: the family and the chapel. With hindsight, it is clear that in both of these a process of hollowing out and weakening was already well under way nationally, and it was soon to be hastened greatly by World War II. (In the postwar years 1947–48 there were more divorces in Britain than there had been in the first four decades of the century.) But during a decline, being provincial and behind the curve can have its advantages, and in Wales these processes were much less advanced than in most of the rest of Britain. The integrity of the family was still intact—not only of the immediate family but of the extended one of cousins and nephews and nieces as well. Responsibility for the well-being of children was paramount, and a premium was put on their education, so that even in the worst of times every effort was made to keep them at school. (When I attended the local grammar school in

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the 1940s—one of those "fucking grammar schools" that Tony Crosland was so eager to abolish when he became Labour Minister of Education in the 1960s—the great majority of the pupils were the children of miners and other manual workers.)

And then there were the chapels—the Bethels and Salems and Bethesdas, in and around which the Congregationalists and Baptists and Methodists lived much of their lives. Secularization was well under way in Britain by my boyhood, of course, and Wales was certainly not unaffected. But the chapels were still a dominant institution, generating much of the energy of the community and having a controlling influence over its public morals. As Sidney and Beatrice Webb—who were not always as silly as when they visited Stalin's Russia—had understood, these essentially independent and self-governing chapels provided excellent political training, and there was a substantial overlap of chapel and trade-union leadership.

As far as the message from the pulpit was concerned, this was something of a time of transition: some preachers still threatened hell and damnation with heart-stopping vividness; some pleaded for a barely disguised Labour Party version of social justice and compassion. But all took for granted the validity of firm moral standards and the responsibility of individuals for their own behavior. The authority of the chapels was reflected in the quality and standing of their ministers. In our family chapel, for instance, the preacher—one Oswald Davies—was paid only modestly, but he had a first-class honors degree in philosophy and a divinity degree from the University of Wales, and another in sociology from the University of London. He was the first intellectual I ever met, and every week he would pass on to me his copy of the *New Statesman and Nation*. As well as being a minister he was a county councillor, representing, it goes without saying, the Labour Party. My mother, along with most of his congregation, venerated him.

Drawing on the pool of social capital that this background of family, chapel, and education provided, Garnant and scores of other communities in Wales managed to survive remarkably well the experience of being hit with the full force of the Depression. And they did so with minimal outside assistance.

It is now sixty years since the end of the Depression. How does Garnant appear today? The first impression of a visitor who had known it in the old days would surely be favorable. Certainly the place is better looking. The physical ravages inflicted by heavy industry have disappeared: the monstrous pyramids of coal waste have been flattened, and grass and trees planted over them; the Amman River is clear again, and trout can be caught in it; and the rough field on which boys used to play football is now an elegantly planned little park, dotted with well-considered groups

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of trees and containing an artificial pond, complete with decorative bridge. There is even a nine-hole golf course—this, and the park, courtesy of Brussels and its program of assistance to "disadvantaged areas."

Culturally, there has been a revival of interest in, and the teaching of, the Welsh language, which is now in a healthier state than it has been for a century. The choirs still sing and compete, and Urdd Gobaith Cymru is active and thriving. The material conditions of life are obviously much improved: indoor plumbing, adequate medical treatment, the usual white goods, television sets. When I was growing up, vacations of any sort were the rarest of luxuries, and very few people had ever been to London. Now, as in most of the rest of the Western world, cheap travel and television have deparochialized life, and while having their hair done, women chat casually about the relative merits of the Costa del Sol and the Adriatic.

All that conceded, however (and it is anything but trivial), it soon becomes apparent that there is also a steep downside. A community that managed to withstand the misery of a drastic economic collapse with fortitude and some style has proved much more susceptible to the destructive force of a culture of dependency and hedonism.

There is no significant work in the valley anymore, except for a few small businesses and some "service" jobs. Most educated young people leave. The chapels are a spent force, either attracting tiny congregations of the aged and very young or closing their doors. (It is reported that the chapels of Wales—usually, in their austere simplicity, the most aesthetically pleasing buildings in the principality, though admittedly there isn't much competition—are being shut at the rate of one a week, to be converted into "entertainment" or "fitness" centers, or some other form of secular meeting place.) Spent too is the vitality of the radical tradition, which has degenerated into the glib, opportunistic patter of Blairism.

While people are still warm and spontaneous, in a very un-English way, an alertness to the possibilities offered by the welfare systems—national and European—seems to be one of the few signs of enterprise left in the place, and the ethic of self-reliance is now conspicuous by its absence. True, its departure was neither abrupt nor entirely unmourned, and as recently as a decade ago occasional admiration for Margaret Thatcher could be heard in this traditional Labour stronghold. But gone it is.

As I write, I'm aware that all this may be taken as the sour complaining of a conservative exile whose romanticizing memories have been disappointed by exposure to reality. But unfortunately there is evidence that my grumblings cannot be so easily dismissed, that in fact things are, if anything, rather worse than I have indicated.

Last year, a report in the *South Wales Evening Post* announced that a short list of poverty-stricken and distressed communities across Wales was being drawn up, from which six would be selected to take part in "a

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pioneering programme to combat social exclusion." Garnant was one of the places on that list. The report noted:

> Evidence of high violent crime figures, drug problems, low car ownership, poor access to health facilities, inadequate facilities and poor adult education in the area has been forwarded to the Welsh office.

The "pioneering programme" is structured to give bureaucrats money to "plough in" to the area as "part of a five-year Welsh office project." Local reactions to this report apparently varied from shame and denial to a happy anticipation of money to spend. In the end, however, the village was not one of those selected, so the stigma came without the compensation.

The report's description may make contemporary Garnant sound almost like southeast Washington, D.C. Fortunately it is nothing as bad as that. Still, in 1990 Garnant did experience its second murder. Appropriately for a community that was in the process of acquiring the sophistication of golf and drugs, this was not a case of a mean little robbery gone wrong but a thoroughly contemporary killing, involving kinky videotaped sex and a multicultural cast. The English proprietor of a new-style pub-restaurant, a man who had previously shown some tolerance for group sex involving his wife and some of his Welsh customers, apparently found it intolerable when she took up with his Portuguese cook. The two men fought and the cook was stabbed to death. A Welsh jury acquitted the proprietor on grounds of self-defense. The present is indeed another country.

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Home from Bohemia

CHARLES GETCHELL

I'm home from Bohemia,
bringing no crystal apple
(all ill shaped, the colors wrong);
no angel of apple wood
(cute, but her flute too fragile
to be packed); not a puppet,
nor a pearl, nor anything
of porcelain (the search grew
wearying—hours, crowns too few).

So will it do to give you news
of something quite outside my plans?
Something no amount of trying
or of buying could have got:
That you've been dreamed of now in Prague.

Charles Getchell is a lawyer in Ipswich, Massachusetts, and the publisher of the Ipswich Press.

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Missing Links

A Scientist Reconstructs Biography

PAT SHIPMAN

I have always been intrigued by missing links. The factual pillars of knowledge are of less interest to me than the gaps between them, the spaces and the voids, the hidden connections. As my career has expanded from the sciences to the arts, my fascination with the ambiguous and the absent-without-leave has grown stronger.

I was trained as a paleoanthropologist, one who deciphers the fossil evidence of the evolution and origin of humankind. The nature of the business is shaped by the fact that the number of relevant fossils is few compared with the significance they must bear. Complete skeletons are almost unknown; a single, complete bone of a rare species is cause enough for celebration. By necessity, paleoanthropologists become specialists in the art of deduction. We fit together the existing fragments and use our knowledge of anatomy to fill in the physical gaps in skulls and bones without creating features that did not exist. We interpret, infer, deduce, and test hypotheses about sizes of brains, functions of limbs, structures of hands, and the timing of the appearance of various physical or behavioral adaptations.

The tangible facts we deal with are the fossils themselves and the dates when those creatures were alive. The discovery of new fossils drives the field, especially when they show surprising features, be they genuine novelties ("I've never seen teeth like that before!") or anatomy that contradicts our expectations of how that lineage evolved ("Who would have thought that

Pat Shipman, Professor of Anthropology at Pennsylvania State University, is the author, most recently, of *Taking Wing:* Archaeopteryx *and the Evolution of Bird Flight*, winner of the 1998 Phi Beta Kappa Award in Science. *The Man Who Found the Missing Link* was published this January by Simon & Schuster.

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bipedal walking began so early?"). Progress also comes from finding new methods for gleaning more insights from the known specimens.

The trick is to fill in the stony gaps and perceive the obscure connections that make sense of the fossil record. While a skeptic's standard quip is "Let the fossils speak for themselves," the fossils are infuriatingly silent. They require the intervention of a human intelligence to make their meaning clear.

About ten years ago, I quit field and laboratory research in paleoanthropology in order to write about scientific discoveries for popular audiences. I believed there was an urgent need for scientific translators, people fluent in both the language and the practice of science who are able to communicate their field's excitement and significance to a nonscientist public, and I have tried to help fill that gap. To me, uncommunicated scientific discoveries are a waste, matched in tragic potential only by the danger of leaving the public uninformed and mistrustful.

Undertaking this new role has neither dulled my love of science nor deadened my appreciation of its powers of revelation. Indeed, it has sharpened my sensitivity to the complex connections and interactions that contribute to scientific discovery. Timing and history, character and personality, circumstance and happenstance all play telling roles. With each successive book that I have written, I have come to realize ever more forcefully that a straightforward recounting of the "facts" is inadequate. Quite simply, science cannot be conveyed as a chronological list of dates and discoveries, theories and experiments; nor do such events incrementally build a cold, objective edifice of knowledge. Scientists are emotional, proud, stubborn, intuitive—everything, in fact, except dispassionate and objective. Scholars bleed for their discoveries: they fight, risk, and sacrifice. It is the heat of the scientists' passionate conviction that forges shimmering truths out of the dross of dull evidence.

The inevitable next move for me was to write a biography of a scientist. I chose as my subject Eugène Dubois, a widely underestimated man of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries whose fossil discoveries and character transformed paleoanthropology from an amateur's hobby to a science. Access to the extraordinarily rich Dubois archives in Naturalis (the National Natural History Museum in Leiden, the Netherlands) provided an abundance of information. My problem was not how to find new material but how to select and shape a narrative out of the complex intricacy of Dubois's life, character, and work. Writing his biography seemed the perfect test for my conviction that science is best told through those people who create her. And so I began struggling to write *The Man Who Found the Missing Link.*

Eugène Dubois was a brilliant Dutch anatomist who was obsessed with finding the "missing link," the transitional form between apes and humans whose existence was predicted by the works of Darwin, Huxley, Haeckel,

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and the other founding fathers of evolutionary theory. At a time when few focused on fossil evidence, Dubois left his academic job in Amsterdam and joined the Royal Dutch East Indies Army as a surgeon so that he could search the East Indies (now Indonesia) for the missing link. Many viewed his quest as worse than rash, despite the clever way he welded sparse facts together to form a scientific scaffolding for his theory that the missing link had once lived in the Indies. Against formidable odds, he succeeded in his aim, finding *Pithecanthropus erectus* (or, as it is now known, *Homo erectus*) in Java. Ironically, his extraordinary success brought more criticism than praise, as his colleagues could not readily accept the message his *Pithecanthropus* proclaimed: that in the human lineage, upright posture evolved before the large brain. Dubois applied the full force of his intelligence, insight, and charisma with considerable tenacity (a trait some might characterize as extreme stubbornness) to analyze and interpret his finds. He insisted that the world take notice of his fossils, invented new modes of analysis, and made the origin of humankind the central scientific issue of his day. It is a rich and fascinating story.

Nonetheless, there are gaps. After his death, Dubois's beloved daughter Eugenie spent hours burning documents that she did not want preserved in the archives (as is recorded in a letter she wrote to the first curator of the Dubois collection). Somehow a few references to events of major importance escaped her censorship and came to my notice as I crawled through the material. But try as I might, I could not excavate all the missing pieces.

Dubois's eight years in the Indies (1887–1895) saw several such incompletely known but obviously crucial events. Three in particular stand out. In 1893, Dubois's father died unexpectedly. Jean Joseph Dubois had strongly disapproved of his son's decision to abandon a promising career in order to search for a hypothetical missing link on the other side of the world. His death robbed Eugène of the chance for reconciliation. Losing a father's blessing was a bitter blow; losing the chance ever to win it back was worse. A few months later, Dubois's wife, Anna, lost (presumably spontaneously) a baby she was carrying. The only record of this event is the poignant phrase "Anna abortus," written in pencil pressed hard into the page of Dubois's pocket calendar, scored out, and then rewritten. Despite his triple role—father, scientist, and physician—Dubois could not save the pregnancy. Coming so soon after his father's death, the death of his child must have been a tragic and deeply felt loss. A letter from Dubois's closest friend, Adam Prentice, offered the use of a country house as a refuge; notations in Dubois's diary indicate that he indeed withdrew from his work and family for a period of some weeks. These are Dubois's only documented responses.

The third event occurred two years later and once again involved Prentice, a Scots coffee planter who worked on a plantation near the

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Dubois home in Java. Prentice was Dubois's confidant, companion, and sounding board; he was undoubtedly the person with whom Dubois had the most lasting and most emotionally intimate relationship of his life. In 1895, after returning from an extended research trip to study and collect fossils in British India, Dubois accused Prentice of seducing his wife. This is clear from a surviving letter from Prentice denying the charge and attempting to resurrect the friendship. Soon after the accusation, the Dubois family sailed for Holland. Over the rest of their lives, the relationship between Dubois and his wife grew increasingly distant and permanently hostile. The correspondence between Dubois and Prentice dwindled more rapidly, ending a few years after Dubois's return to Holland. Remarkably, the friendship between Dubois and Prentice was renewed with touching fondness some forty years later, when both men were in their eighties. While neither the accusation of adultery nor the enduring friendship between Dubois and Prentice has any scientific significance, these events reveal much about Dubois's character and vulnerability.

Here was my dilemma. Omitting these poorly known events (the two deaths, the possible adultery) or downplaying their significance in Dubois's life would be both inaccurate and dishonest. Including them and giving them the emphasis and attention I believe they deserve would mean deviating from the strictly factual. Which was I to choose?

This quandary forced me to reconsider the nature of a biographer's duties. The first, and I believe the most sacred, is to the subject. To undertake a biography—to spend years in another's life—is to invite a haunting, as Richard Holmes, biographer of Coleridge and Shelley, so aptly expresses it. If the relationship works, then the biographer is indebted to the subject for speaking across the gulfs of time, class, culture, and gender. To be haunted is a privilege, albeit sometimes an emotionally costly one. I feel a clear moral obligation to be Dubois's spokesman in this century, the one who tells his life, explains his value, reveals his flaws, celebrates his accomplishments, and makes sense of his tangled, complex, stunning life. My primary responsibility to Dubois is to get it right, to capture his essence in words as thoroughly as he captured my mind.

Make no mistake. After years of living with Dubois's thoughts, words, photographs, and specimens, after visiting his homes and his places of work, after searching for his lost child's grave in Java, after going to his fossil sites, I found that he began inhabiting my mind so noisily that he could not be ignored. Unwittingly, I began to develop an odd turn of phrase. When questioned by my copy editor, I realized I was writing English as spoken by a Dutch person born in the nineteenth century. The echo of his words rang in my head. Once, while in the throes of writing, I went into a shop and tried on a hat, asking my husband if he liked it. "Do you know why you picked that hat?" he laughed. "It's exactly

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like the one Dubois is wearing in his last photograph." It was.

Dubois demanded my full attention, my best efforts. I decided to reconnoiter and map the gaps in his story as well as I could, for I could not leave out events that so strongly shaped his life. Were I to stick to the truth—the strictly documented—I would shortchange my subject and my readers. And therein lies my second, sacred obligation as a biographer: I owe it to the reader not to lie but to show the Truth about the subject, insofar as I am able to see it. Providing that glimpse requires selection (of facts) and connection (to other people, places, times, beliefs, events), the attributes that make biography a creative art.

Several modern literary critics have maintained that creativity is to be eschewed, that the only legitimate content of biographies is factual. In that case, we might as well simply publish the archives and be done with it. But that would indeed be the act of publishing "Minutiae without Meaning," in Stanley Fish's damning phrase—and a jolly boring book it would make, too. Fish argues that "biographers . . . can only be inauthentic, can only get it wrong, can only lie, can only substitute their own story for the story of their announced subject." Clearly, Fish is a man with no confidence in his or anyone else's capacity for empathy and understanding; I cannot help wondering why he protests so much. I fear he mistakes the facts for the Truth, when they are far smaller and more trivial things, full of inconsistencies and holes.

In the interests of fulfilling my dual obligations as biographer, I believe I must go well beyond the truth to reach the Truth. In a recent issue of this journal, Frederick Busch described his trials during the writing of his reality-based novel about Melville, *The Night Inspector.* Busch chose the approach of "eating" the facts, of metabolizing them and transforming them into a novel that he believes conveys the Truth about Melville's character and fills in a gap in Melville's life. By writing a novel, he hoped (fruitlessly) to escape criticism.

That Busch's editor disapproved is no surprise to me. Novelists may be entitled to a license to create, but it is one with a restricted purview. Biographers are even more tightly restrained. Some would categorically exclude them from the list of those approved for creative licenses. Edmund Morris was roundly criticized for inserting himself as a fictional character into *Dutch,* his biography of Ronald Reagan; so was Peter Ackroyd for including in *Dickens* some imaginary meetings between Charles Dickens and his fictional characters. Perhaps to avoid such problems, Joyce Carol Oates chose to write *Blonde* as a fictional but thinly disguised biography of Marilyn Monroe, and historian Richard Slotkin wrote a novel, *Abe,* about a rail-splitting president. I chose to stretch the boundaries of the biographical genre by attempting a novel-between-the-documents, a narrative that moves seamlessly from biography to novel and back again as the story requires. My American editor is enthusiastic about the results, as am I. My British editor has voiced firm objections to my genre-bending. The closer to "seamless" my efforts became, the more

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she disliked them. As of this writing—after a series of long and serious disagreements—I expect to publish a quite different book about Dubois in the United Kingdom. If I insisted on interpreting and interpolating between the facts, as I do, then my British editor maintained that the transitions must be grossly apparent. She also demanded that I rewrite the narrative from the historical present into the past tense, creating a jarring contrast with the excerpts and quotations from original documents, letters, and the like, which were of course written in the present tense.

Be assured, there is no attempt to deceive the reader in either version. I guard the reader's trust assiduously, providing more than five hundred entries in the endnotes that detail the sources for facts, opinions, conversations, events, dates, descriptions, and so on. Lest a few of my gap-fillers bewilder the reader, I have included some extraordinary notes. For example, one reads in part: "There is no evidence of the content or the intended recipient of this unsent telegram." While another says simply: "There is no evidence of this document whatsoever." To my knowledge, these are the only non-sources ever included in the endnotes of a book.

As I strove to create this novel-between-the-documents, I had some gratifying moments. I guessed at more than a few facts, including the identity (planter's daughter) and the timing and cause of death (difficult childbirth) of the wife of Adam Prentice. Material turned up by my research assistant a year later in the archives of the Centraal Bureau voor Genealogy in The Hague confirmed my guesses: Jane de Clonie MacLennan was indeed the daughter of a planter, and she died on the day her son, Gerardus Alexander Prentice MacLennan, was born. Since there was no record of a second marriage after Jane's death, I supposed that Prentice took a native mistress, or *nyai*, a common practice in the colonial Indies. Many months after writing that into the book, I received a copy of a letter written in 1974 by Prentice's grandson, Adam Boyd (now deceased), to Dubois's grandson, Jean Dubois. Adam Boyd identifies himself as the son of William Boyd and the grandson of Robert Boyd, the owner of the plantation where Prentice worked in Java. Adam Boyd's mother was Samila, the mixed-race daughter of his maternal grandfather, Adam Prentice, and his *nyai*. These are small details, but they gave me confidence that I could, indeed, hear Dubois's voice in my head.

In the end, the readers and critics will judge. I have filled in missing links in this tale of the Missing Link. Between the documented facts, I inserted emotions, thoughts, and circumstances confirmed by my intuition and knowledge of Dubois's character. I have done, in fact, what paleoanthropologists always do: deduced, inferred, filled in, filled out, and hypothesized from the bare bones of the skeleton, adding context and environment until the whole picture emerges, as true as I can make it. If later discoveries prove me wrong, so be it, for that is the nature of science. I know Dubois would understand what I have done.

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Soji-ji

JOHN LOWE

It was cold and silent in the *zendo.* Bowing to the low platform along the wall, the place where I would sit, I slipped off my sandals and sank down, cross-legged, on the high black cushion. "No," whispered the young monk next to me. He grasped my ankles and adjusted my legs. I was forty-one, and for the first time in my life I was in the half-lotus position, beginning a week of meditation in the great monastery of Soji-ji, up the coast from Yokohama.

I first went to Japan more than thirty years ago. For eight years I would return for a few weeks, working in Tokyo but finding time to visit other places. Like many foreigners, I was keen to learn more about its traditional culture, which still had so much influence on contemporary life. For a time I considered studying a traditional Japanese art—tea ceremony, calligraphy, flower arranging. But the more I thought about such activities, the more they seemed to lead back to the inspiration of Zen. I had read Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery.* His Zen master taught that it was not the hand or the eye that directed the arrow, but the inner spirit. In the same way, the spirit of Zen guided the hand of the tea master, the calligrapher, the flower arranger. Indeed, Herrigel's wife had written *Zen in the Art of Flower Arrangement,* invoking the same principles.

In recent decades, Zen has attracted increasing numbers of foreign postulants, both in Japan and in the West. There was a meditation center a few miles from my former home in England; there is a flourishing Zen group not far from where I now write in rural France. Once my own interest was aroused, I began to read widely—Dogen, Suzuki, Alan Watts.

The English writer John Lowe lived in Japan for thirteen years after his stay at Soji-ji. He has written five books about Kyoto and is at work on the *Companion Guide to Barcelona and Catalonia*. His last contribution to the SCHOLAR was "The Lecture Theater of the Absurd" (Winter 1996).

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But reading did not seem to help me discover the nature of Zen. I needed to experience it myself.

That was not easy. I knew there were Zen temples, particularly in Kyoto, that took in foreigners and offered courses designed for them. I wanted to stay in a Japanese training monastery, where I would be fully exposed to the rigors of monastic life. I was then working for a large international company, and I put my problem to my senior colleagues. They had already got me into many inaccessible secular places. Perhaps a Zen monastery would not be outside their sphere of influence. Though they were too polite to say so, they obviously thought me mad. But somehow they obtained permission for me to stay for a few days in Soji-ji, one of the Soto sect's two main training monasteries, where the sons of Zen priests from Soto temples all over Japan come for six years' training.

Two of my colleagues drove me there. Their faces were long enough for a funeral, and to judge by the sumptuous lunch they gave me before we set out, they were certain that I would soon be starved to death. It was clear that in their view Zen life was not for an English cultural consultant.

Soji-ji occupied a large area, with many buildings linked by covered walkways. A monk led us from the main entrance to the abbot's quarters. The abbot was waiting for us. We bowed in silence, and another monk served cups of green tea. I sat opposite the abbot. He was a small man, dressed in brown robes, his skin tight over the skull of his shaven head. He remained absolutely still, but his eyes were powerful. Without a word or a movement, he dominated the room.

Turning his penetrating gaze on me, he spoke, in English, in a quiet but stern voice, "This room has two doors. One you have just come through. The other leads into the monastery. If you wish to join our community, you must promise that while you are here, whatever you are told to do, you will obey without question. We do not normally take foreigners here, and we seldom allow anyone to come for only a few days. You must agree to stay here for that time, and you must do your best to fit into the life of the monastery. Those are my conditions. There is still time to change your mind and to go back through the door where you entered."

Nothing would have induced me to turn back. I replied that I understood the conditions and would abide by them. The abbot nodded, and in a kinder voice asked me why I wanted to sample the life of his monastery. I spoke of my desire to experience Zen. I told him that I realized that a few days was nothing, but that in everything one had to make a beginning.

"That is a sensible answer," said the abbot. "You will find life hard here, but you will have your first glimpse of Zen. You may enter the monastery." I said good-bye to my colleagues and walked through the door into one of the strangest experiences of my life. Inside I was met by a young monk

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in brown robes. He was Swiss, not Japanese; he spoke English and had been studying at Soji-ji for three years. Kurt was the only foreigner in the community. He explained that he had been assigned to look after me, but that a senior priest—my Zen master—would be responsible for my spiritual progress. This was Godo Roshi, whom I would visit each morning.

Kurt guided me down the long covered walkways that led to our quarters. Every so often he would stop, turn right, pause, and bow. We were passing the main temple, or some other important site, and I had to learn to recognize the places where I must turn and bow. Life in the monastery would be full of small rituals that punctuated every part of our daily routine, from the movements in the *zendo*, or meditation hall, to the correct manner of eating, and even to the concealing of one's underclothes in the open lockers of the bathhouse. Happily for me, there always seemed to be a monk at my elbow to keep me from shaming myself.

Kurt led me to my room. I was grateful for the privacy, but it was cold and drab. The tatami mats were threadbare, as were the paper window screens, filtering a gloomy light that made the room seem colder. The worst shock was the sparse bedding, which offered scant protection against the seeping cold. I did not wear monk's robes, but, luckily, I had been advised to bring warm clothes, loose enough to make long hours of "sitting" comfortable. The most serious hardship of my stay at Soji-ji would be the lack of sleep and the awful cold of the December nights. At the beginning of training, some of the young monks suffer from severe piles—a consequence of the sitting—and even contract tuberculosis. I suffered nothing worse than a blinding two-day headache, probably caused by sleep deprivation.

The basic routine of the day was simple, if exacting. We rose at 3:30 A.M. At 4:00 there was a long service for the whole community in the main temple. After cleaning our quarters, we ate breakfast. From about 8:00 A.M. onward, our day was divided into six forty-five-minute periods of meditation, interspersed with shifts of manual work. The routine was broken by lunch and supper, and the bathhouse opened at 9:00 P.M. I got to bed about 10:30, craving every minute of the permitted five hours of sleep.

On my first full day at Soji-ji, I rolled off my wafer-thin futon at 3:30, aching, frozen, and unrefreshed, longing for five more hours of sleep. There were no consolations. It was bitterly cold, and our washing facilities were wooden troughs in an open courtyard where icicles hung from dripping taps. Zen has a variety of disciplines. As I splashed icy water over my face, I seemed to see the stern eyes of the abbot, and I splashed again.

Inside the main temple, kneeling in my place, I was overwhelmed by the magnificent decoration, by the lines of richly robed priests, by the surrounding congregation of about three hundred young monks. The officiating priest sprinkled incense on a fire at the high altar, and sweet

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clouds of smoke ascended into the great circle of gold suspended above it. The service lasted about an hour and a half. Throughout, one had to sit on one's ankles, in the Japanese fashion, without moving.

The service centered on the chanting of a sutra. Before the high altar, two rows of priests sat at low desks, one row facing the other. Each priest's desk was laden with a tall pile of thin volumes. After lengthy chanting from one volume, the service reached a startlingly beautiful climax. All the volumes of the sutra were stacked on the right-hand side of each of the priests' low desks. The books were bound in the Japanese style, their yellow pages folded like an accordion. Together the priests picked up the first volume and tossed it in an arc through the air, so that it landed and refolded on the left-hand side of the desk. Time and again, until the whole sutra had been exposed, twenty-four brilliant arcs of yellow trembled through the air like cascading waterfalls. Thus, symbolically, the whole sutra was "read" each morning.

When the service ended, Kurt and I returned to our part of the monastery. I longed for breakfast but had to make do with a cup of green tea—which, mercifully, was always available. Food was a good hour away, after we had cleaned our rooms and other parts of our quarters. You may wonder how cleaning a more or less empty Japanese room could take the best part of an hour. The answer is, easily—the way we had to do it. The room had many narrow dust-collecting ledges, most of them on the sliding screens that covered the window. These ledges had to be dusted without piercing the paper screen. This could not have been done with a western duster. Instead we used a small "whip," consisting of several tails of rag attached to a short bamboo handle. With this domestic appliance, we whipped away the dust—carefully, ledge by ledge. Then the recipients of the displaced dust, the tatami floor mats, had to be rubbed down with wet and dry cloths. It was a laborious business, especially at five in the morning and on an empty stomach.

We ate our meals with the intricate ritual that informed everything we did. Kurt and I were segregated from the younger monks, whom I met only later on in the bathhouse; we ate in our quarters with four older monks. The food was simple and monotonous, but ample. Breakfast, lunch, and supper were the same: vegetable soup and plain rice, enlivened with slices of pickled radish. You could help yourself to as much as you wished—even second and third helpings—but once the food was in your bowl, you were obligated to eat it all. Food was a sacred gift, never to be wasted. We ate in silence, using simple sign language for any essential communication. Grace was also silent: you simply raised your main bowl with two hands in a gesture of gratitude. Each of us had three bowls and a pair of chopsticks. The largest bowl was for soup, the middle-sized one for rice, the smallest for the pickled radish. We also had a teacup and a small, square white cloth. When we'd eaten, we began the most complicated ritual:

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Zen-style washing up. Kurt had warned me to leave one slice of pickled radish uneaten, and to watch the others when the meal ended. I'd wondered what I was going to do with the single slice. The answer was simple and ingenious. When we'd all finished eating, each of us poured a small amount of tea into the largest bowl. We then took the pickle slice in our chopsticks and used it and the tea to clean the bowl. When the bowl was spotless, we poured the tea into the middle one, repeating the process, finally eating the pickle and drinking the tea from the third bowl. We then dried the three bowls with the white cloth, stacked them inside one another, and tied them like a pudding with the cloth. A special knot held the chopsticks in place on top. Each phase of the ritual had a Zen meaning: the cleaning and stacking of bowls expressed economy and austerity. With each action our minds were to be focused on the path we sought to follow—the way of Zen. Such rituals provided physical handholds in the *zendo*'s uncertain, shifting world of meditation.

After breakfast I went to see my Zen master, Godo Roshi. He began by explaining the central activity of life at Soji-ji, the frequent periods of meditation—or, as it is often more prosaically called, "sitting."

"When you leave me, you will go to the *zendo*, where you will have your first experience of *zazen*. Have you ever sat before?" I shook my head. "Here you will sit six times each day, each period for forty-five minutes. *Zazen* is physically and spiritually demanding. For the beginner it is particularly hard, but you must persist. It is the central purpose of our lives here. Everything else is subordinate to meditation. And you must let the spirit of the *zendo* inspire everything you do here, until everything becomes an act of Zen.

"Today I will give you just one piece of advice," the old priest added. "When you are seated in the *zendo*, try to empty your mind of all conscious thought. You must try to attain an empty mind. Inevitably, thoughts will come into your mind. Do not try to keep them out and do not retain them. Let them flow through your mind like small waves breaking on the sand and vanishing. Good breathing will help you, and correct breathing comes from an upright posture. Keep still, or you will distract yourself and others, and relax through your breathing to achieve that empty mind. That is enough for today. Go to the *zendo* now and do your best." Godo Roshi was kind and helpful. As Kurt led me away, I hoped I could follow his advice.

The meditation hall was a large, high chamber with a wide, two-foot-high platform running around three sides. In the center was a statue of the Buddha. There was room on the platform for about twelve people to sit closely packed; there must have been a much larger *zendo* for the young monks. The chamber was semidark, with only a little light filtering through the shuttered windows. When sitting, one kept one's eyes half-closed, but never shut. That might have invited sleep.

That first period of meditation was the longest forty-five minutes of my

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life. Once in the half-lotus position, I was reasonably comfortable for the first ten minutes, able to concentrate on the difficult task of emptying my mind. I was not troubled by particular thoughts, but I was too aware of my strange circumstances and the extraordinary stillness of my neighbors. Then I began to feel a pain in my left knee that would stay with me until I left the monastery. The knee is the vulnerable place for those not used to this position, and the pain was sufficient to fill an empty mind. We always sat barefooted, and I had thought my feet would get cold. I never felt them. All I felt was my throbbing knee. When I reported the distracting pain to Godo Roshi the next morning, he said only, "You have made a good beginning."

The half-lotus position is easier for Japanese, particularly young monks, who have spent their lives sitting on floors. Most Japanese Zen masters insist on the half-lotus position, as it ensures correct breathing. But westerners unused to the practice can end up in surgery. Many now practice Zen meditation sitting upright in a hard chair, which seems to work perfectly well. Perhaps concentration is as necessary as one's position. Perversely, and perhaps masochistically, I am glad I had the experience of sitting in the true Zen fashion, the high cushion pushing my weight forward onto my two knees, my body stable and erect to encourage breathing from the stomach. My regret was that I had not started many years earlier.

Someone at last gave a sign, and the session was over. We did not leave immediately. Forming a line, we moved slowly around the *zendo* for five minutes. This is called "walking Zen," and is partly a gradual way of surfacing from meditation. It is a reminder that Zen meditation is not confined to sitting, but infuses even the most ordinary activities of everyday life.

And so the day went on. The first session of meditation was followed by an hour of gardening. Because I was not Japanese, but an exceptionally tall, long-footed westerner, this mundane activity concealed yet another agony. For our gardening we wore *geta*—wooden sandals raised slightly off the ground. They are comfortable and practical when they fit, but the monastery had only small sizes. Part of my heel hung over the back, with the wooden edge cutting into my sole. But it would have been pointless to complain.

I survived the next session of meditation, which was followed by lunch. After both lunch and supper we had a half-hour recreation period during which we were allowed to talk. One of the monks brought in some beautiful apples. The fruit was the offering of the faithful and, having spent a statutory period on the altar, was now distributed to the monks. These occasional offerings provided the only variation in our diet.

After lunch we did more manual work, washing down the long wooden walkways. The monks were adept at this. They took a long, damp cloth in their hands, and then—bending forward until their faces were

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only a foot away from the floorboards—ran the length of the corridor, pushing the cloth ahead of them. It was acrobatic. When I tried, I fell over at the second step and was demoted to a broom.

Two more sessions of sitting, separated by more manual labor, were followed by supper and a final evening meditation. My knee was no better, but it didn't seem to get worse. By nine o'clock I could feel every aching bone in my body. I could hardly reach the bathhouse. As I opened the door, I saw through a pall of steam a huge bath, crowded with about fifty young monks, wallowing like fifty pink seals. They weren't making much noise, but the bathhouse echo added to the inferno effect. The changing area was lined with lockers. "Do not expose your underclothes in your locker," Kurt had said, "and for yourself, use your hand and don't expose anything." Underwear was considered unclean, and exposing one's private parts immodest. That is the rule in any Japanese bathhouse, monastic or secular. I climbed—almost collapsed—into the steaming water. Lying still, I felt a flicker of life returning. In the days ahead it was often not Zen but the thought of the bath that would keep me going.

The trainee monks crowded round me. What was my name? Was I an American? How old was I? Was I married? Did I have children? Why had I come? What did I think of Soji-ji? Had I ever had a Japanese bath? I explained in halting Japanese that this was my first day of practicing Zen; that I was half-dead from exhaustion; that my back ached, my head ached, my knee ached, and I had no idea how I'd survive the next day.

"Ah, that is the beginning," said one of the trainees. "Don't worry, we all suffer like that to start with. Even though we are brought up to be priests, we find the life hard." Then came a flood of advice about easing one's way through the training. As we soaked, I was told how to sleep my way through *zazen* without being caught, how to get out at night if one had an undeniable urge for a woman. I returned from the bath to my ragged futon a wiser man, more aware of the inclusive nature of Zen.

I did not get the urge to visit a local brothel. I barely had strength to climb into my own bed. I did once visit the local town, Tsurumi. After lunch one day, an older monk said, "You need a break. Why don't you miss *zazen* this afternoon and go for a walk outside the monastery? It will refresh your spirit." I took his advice, but I was surprised to find that the outside world felt strangely threatening. Tsurumi was not an exciting town, and after wandering around for two hours and buying some chocolate for our recreation period, I returned home. Despite its rigors, that was how I now thought of Soji-ji.

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THREE PROSE POEMS

HENRI MICHAUX
translated by Sydney Lea

A Prudent Man

The fellow thought he had a limestone deposit in his gut. Daily he went to this doctor or that, each of whom would say: "Your urinalysis shows nothing," or else that he was on his way to decalcinization, or that he smoked too much, his nerves needed rest, or . . . or . . . or . . .

He quit going to his appointments and stayed home with the deposit. Now limestone *can* be friable, but not always. There are carbonates and sulfates and chlorates and perchlorates, other salts—it's natural to find a little of everything in a deposit. Sure, in the urethral canal everything's liquid, but you don't pass stones without suffering like a dog. You can't breathe too heavily, either, can't get your heart pumping too hard by chasing a streetcar. If the blockage breaks up and a piece gets into your blood, well . . . bye-bye, Paris!

In the abdomen there are all sorts of arteries, large and small, important veins, the heart itself, the aorta and other crucial organs. That's why bending over is madness. Getting on a horse? Who on earth would dream of such a thing?

Oh, the prudence a life demands!

Often he imagines how many other people have deposits inside them—limestone, lead, iron (lately a chap who'd never seen a battlefield had a slug extracted from his ticker). Such people proceed prudently too, thereby giving themselves away to the public, who just laugh at them.

But they remain prudent folk, prudent, prudently walking along as they ponder nature, which contains so many, so many mysteries.

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Getting Involved

Once I had too much respect for nature. I confronted objects and landscapes and I let them be. All that's behind me now. *I mean to get involved.*

I found myself bored at Honfleur. So I deliberately kicked up some sand: I introduced a few camels. There wasn't any reason for this: I just took it in mind, and I meant to follow through with the greatest care. I stuck them there on the most crowded days, Saturdays in the market square. The throng was beyond description, and the tourists would say: "Lord, what a stink! These locals are really filthy!"

The stench soon reached the harbor, where it was mistaken for rotten shrimp. The people left the scene all covered in dust and hairs—no one could say from where.

You should have heard the hoofbeats of those camels at night as they tried to jump over the locks—*gong! gong!* on the metal, the planks!

My camel invasion was a quick and sure one.

Soon enough the folks of Honfleur started squinting all the time, showing that suspicious expression so peculiar to camel-drivers as they check to see if anything's missing, if the caravan can keep going.

I, alas, had to leave town on the fourth day.

I launched a lot of other travelers too; they left the square as rapidly as they could, taking to the sea without a worry about the heaviness of the cargo. They sailed right on, saved by their new faith.

Too bad I had to leave like that, and yet I strongly doubt that calm soon returned to that puny town of shrimp and mussel fishers.

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My Statues

I have my statues, the centuries have given them to me, legacies: centuries of waiting, centuries of discouragement, centuries of vagueness and of my inextinguishable hope have fashioned them. Now they are simply there.

As with any old bric-a-brac, I rarely know what they represent.

Their origins are obscure to me, lost as they are in my life's night, where only their forms have preserved themselves from being swept, inevitably, away.

But there they are, their marble growing harder with every year, whitely illuminating the deep darkness of so many forgotten souls.

Henri Michaux (1899–1984) was born in Belgium and lived in Paris. He published more than thirty books of poetry, prose, and drama, but is best remembered for his prose poems. Sydney Lea's seventh collection of poems is *Pursuit of a Wound*. He currently teaches in Lugano, Switzerland.

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Wigwam Words

JILL LEPORE

One gray day not long ago I walked across Harvard Yard and into the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, an aging brick building on the delightfully named Divinity Avenue. At the entrance to the Hall of the North American Indian, with its glass cases of bows, wampum, and woven baskets, a large sign picturing a tomahawk read, in bold letters, "I AM DETERMINED NOT TO LIVE TILL I HAVE NO COUNTRY." The sign attributed this battle cry to Philip, the Wampanoag Indian leader of a revolt against English colonists in seventeenth-century New England.

I was flummoxed. Having spent years searching New England archives for documents about King Philip's War, including the precious few that were dictated by Philip, I knew he had said some memorable things in his lifetime. But nothing in the historical record supports the notion that he ever said "I am determined not to live till I have no country."

Spurious Indian speeches abound. "Should you ask me / whence these stories?" asked Longfellow in *Hiawatha,* answering, "I repeat them as I heard them / from the lips of Nawadaha." But Longfellow actually based Hiawatha's story on one published by the ethnologist Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who copied it from a certain J. V. H. Clark, who apparently made it up. In our own day, environmentalists from Omaha to Amsterdam believe that Duwamish Chief Seattle declared that "the earth is our mother" in an 1854 speech, and they have transcribed his message on bumper stickers, T-shirts, and inspirational coffee mugs; yet Seattle's alleged speech was not recorded until 1877, eleven years after his death, and the popular

Jill Lepore teaches History and American Studies at Boston University. Her book *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* won the Bancroft Prize in History and Biography and the Phi Beta Kappa Society's 1998 Ralph Waldo Emerson Award. *A Is for American: Letters, and Other Characters* is forthcoming from Knopf.

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version was created only in 1970, when Ted Perry, a Texas freelancer, wrote a script for a television documentary about ecology. Perry had not read the 1877 rendition of the speech; his source was a 1969 revision, greatly modified and "translated from the Victorian English," presented as part of an early Earth Day rally. As Perry has freely admitted, "I wrote a speech which was a fiction."

"I am determined not to live till I have no country" falls short of the literary standards of Longfellow and is too long for a bumper sticker. But after seeing it at the Peabody Museum, I seemed to run across it at every turn: in a brochure advertising a bronze bust of Philip; in *Until I Have No Country,* a 1996 novel about King Philip's War; in a best-selling children's history book; and, worst of all, in a well-known college textbook. I may be alone in bristling at it, but the story behind King Philip's supposed speech shows how Americans' long-standing admiration for Indian oratory has subjected Indians to a shabby sort of historical ventriloquism.

The checkered past of spurious Indian speech is bound up with the history of European and American assumptions about Indians and Indian languages. Columbus, ignoring contrary evidence, believed that the Indians he encountered had no real language of their own. The explorers and colonists who followed him soon revised that notion: by the time Jamestown and Plymouth were settled, the prevailing belief was that Indians did have languages—barbaric, guttural, grating, ridiculous, impossible to learn, and possibly satanic. Seventeenth-century observers were almost universally disdainful of Indian speech. Cotton Mather scoffed that Indian words were so long that they must have been growing since the confusion at Babel. Then, under the lens of Enlightenment theories about language and civilization, Indian speech came to be seen not as especially awful but as especially eloquent—more so than the speech of civilized peoples who, having learned to write well, had lost the power to speak forcefully. Jean-Jacques Rousseau held that American Indians spoke the earliest form of language: poetry. Free from the restraints of reasoning and record keeping, primitive peoples, like the famous orators of antiquity, made speeches full of natural rhythm and passion and persuasion. (A vision of Homer in moccasins springs to mind.)

The American image of the eloquent savage changed in the late nineteenth century. After years of Plains Indian warfare, Native American speech was again seen as ugly, unredeemable, unevolved. "Ugh" emerged as the ubiquitous Indian exclamation. Such conceptions would later be perpetuated by the screenwriters who scripted lines for the taciturn Sioux, Dakota, and Lakota warriors in John Wayne westerns.

Even while it lasted, admiration of Indian speech never extended to Indian languages. The savage became eloquent only when his words were

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translated into English. At the same time, Indian imports into the English language could be discomfiting. In 1754, the English essayist Richard Owen Cambridge mockingly claimed to have received a letter from an American whose Indianized speech, foreign and full of metaphor, was simply impenetrable: "The *Chippoways* and *Orundaks* are still very troublesome. Last week they *scalped* one of our Indians; but the *six nations* continue firm, and at a meeting of *Sachems* it was determined *to take up the hatchet,* and *make the war-kettle boil.* The French desired *to smoak the calumet of peace.*" When Noah Webster included words of Indian derivation like "skunk" and "opossum" in his early dictionaries, critics on both sides of the Atlantic derided his "wigwam words," declaring that no proper dictionary should include such vulgar, un-English terms.

This history is a grim tale of linguistic racism. But it provides clues that can help us trace the provenance of questionable quotations. How Indian speech appears both in fiction and in archival sources depends to a large degree on when it was first written down. If a speech was transcribed when Indian languages were considered satanic, it might survive only in conventional English prose, since early colonists were loath to attend too carefully to the devil's tongue. If taken down when Indian oratory was considered eloquent, it was apt to be poetic and metaphorical.

Consider "I am determined not to live till I have no country." To evaluate the plausibility of those words, we must know who King Philip was and how he expressed himself. "Philip" was a son of Massasoit, the Wampanoag sachem who befriended the first English settlers of the Plymouth Colony. His early Algonquian name was Metacom, or Metacomet. His older brother, Wamsutta, became sachem about 1660 and petitioned the colonial authorities—probably as a gesture of amity—that English names be conferred on him and his brother; the colonials dubbed them Alexander and Philip, after the ancient leaders of Macedonia. Wamsutta soon died, possibly from poisoning, and Metacom succeeded him as Sachem. He was then in his midtwenties. Since he was illiterate and spoke limited English, no documents written in his own hand (or representing his own voice) survive. The closest we can come is a dictated letter to the governor of the colony, taken down—and to the extent necessary, translated—by his scribe, Tom Sancsuik, in 1671:

> King Philip desire to let you understand that he could not come to the Court, for Tom, his interpreter, has a pain in his back, that could not travil so far, and Philip sister is very sik. Philip would intreat that favor of you, and aney of the majestrates, if aney English or Engine [Indian] speak about aney land, he preay you to give them no answer at all. . . . He will come a sune as possible he can to speak with you, and so I rest, your verey loveing friend, Philip.

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Here Philip comes across both as an ordinary man, hampered by his interpreter's backache, and as a leader capable of considerable diplomacy in his efforts to hold onto his people's land. But this letter is little known and rarely cited. I've never seen it quoted in an exhibit or a textbook, and it's difficult to imagine a blood-and-guts novel about King Philip's War (which, in proportion to population, was the deadliest war in American history) titled *Your Verey Loveing Friend.* More widely quoted than Philip's own letters are speeches attributed to him by whites, of which there are dozens. Some are claimed to be fact, some are admittedly fictive. In none of them does the purported author resemble the Philip of Tom Sancsuik's letter.

In 1671, the same year Sancsuik's bad back prevented Philip from visiting the governor, the Puritan minister John Eliot published a tract promoting his missionary activities among New England's Indians. In it he referred to a fictional Philip who couldn't be more different from the Philip of Sancsuik's letter: a woefully abject leader, deeply moved by the preaching of missionaries, who moans,

> Oh what mountains of sin have I heaped up in my wicked life. . . . I am a sachem over my people, to rule them in virtue, and to do them good. But I have done contrary to my charge. I have led them out into all sin, and thereby I have done them the greatest hurt and mischief. I have been a means of their damnation. Oh how many are gone, and going to hell on my account? How shall I escape damnation, who have led so many into that eternal pit? Oh I am pained at my heart, what shall I do? Oh what shall I do?

That was only the start. After 1675, when the real Philip began to make war against the English settlers, he became a source of inspiration for the poets of the time. Even before the fighting ended, a Boston physician named Benjamin Tompson published an epic poem that included a speech ostensibly given by Philip to his warriors on the eve of battle:

> My friends, our fathers were not half so wise
> As we ourselves who see with younger eyes.
> They sell our land to Englishmen who teach
> Our nation all so fast to pray and preach:
> Of all our country they enjoy the best,
> And quickly they intend to have the rest.

If Eliot's Philip follows the formula of a Puritan conversion narrative, Tompson's Philip speaks in the couplets of an epic hero. Both these texts are free of any regard for the way Indians might actually have spoken.

King Philip's War ended with Philip's death in 1676. His body was mutilated and his head triumphally paraded through the streets of Plymouth.

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Interest in Philip cooled, but it would revive again in the decades following the American Revolution. In 1814, Washington Irving claimed Philip as an American patriot: "a true born prince, gallantly fighting at the head of his subjects to avenge the wrongs of his family; to retrieve the tottering power of his line; and to deliver his native land from the oppression of usurping strangers." A popular epic poem with Philip as tragic hero was published in 1820; James Fenimore Cooper wrote a novel about King Philip's War in 1827. The famous Shakespearean actor Edwin Forrest portrayed Philip onstage in 1829, in the title role of a drama called *Metamora: Or, the Last of the Wampanoags.* "My curses on you, white men!" Metamora shouted to audiences across America. "May the Great Spirit curse you when he speaks in his war voice from the clouds!" The following year, John Greenleaf Whittier wrote an elegiac poem memorializing "Metacom"; in 1831 the *North American Review* called Philip a leader who "did and endured enough to immortalize him as a warrior, a statesman, and we may add, as a high-minded and noble patriot." By now, Philip was deeply mired in the mucky conventions of the eloquent savage.

Even Indians succumbed. In 1836 the Pequot Indian minister and activist William Apess gave a speech he attributed to Philip that began, "BROTHERS,—You see this vast country before us, which the great Spirit gave to our fathers and us; you see the buffalo and deer that now are our support." Apess had leaned so heavily on the speeches of western Indians that he neglected to remove the buffalo from the New England landscape. By 1847 the formulaic conventions of Indian speech were so well established that the burlesque actor John Brougham could mock Forrest's melodramatic figure in a parody titled *Metamora: Last of the Pollywogs,* in which Brougham's "Pollywog" chieftain roared, "White fools, beware! . . . / The spirits of the mighty Pollywog / Stretch out their cowhides long your race to flog. / And the big flood of the wild Indian's wrath, / Like the Mississippi's, still shall swamp your path!" He made his exit with the line: "Death or my nation's glory! That's the talk."

In the succession of phony Philippian speeches, where does "I am determined not to live till I have no country" belong? Because it is a noble, patriotic, and highly (if awkwardly) stylized proclamation, we might expect to place it near those of Forrest or Apess, circa 1830. And indeed, if we are willing to follow an overgrown, winding, and rather wearying paper trail, we can trace it back to the early nineteenth century, when Americans first resonated to the eloquence of the noble savage.

The trail begins with the Peabody Museum exhibit, the college textbook, the children's history book, the bronze bust brochure, and the King Philip's War novel, all of which date from the early to mid-1990s and were probably inspired by Russell Bourne's 1990 history, *The Red King's Rebellion.* The book's third chapter is titled "Until I Have No Coun-

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try." As Bourne tells it, Philip met with a party of Englishmen in Providence on the eve of King Philip's War and delivered the following speech, explaining his determination to wage war:

> The English who came first to this country were but an handful of people, forlorn, poor, and distressed. My father was then sachem, he relieved their distresses in the most kind and hospitable manner. He gave them land to plant and build upon . . . they flourished and increased. By various means they got possession of a great part of his territory. But he still remained their friend till he died. My elder brother became sachem. . . . He was seized and confined and thereby thrown into illness and died. Soon after I became sachem they disarmed all my people . . . their land was taken. But a small part of the dominion of my ancestors remains. *I am determined not to live until I have no country.*

The Red King's Rebellion does not include footnotes, but Bourne may have derived this speech from David Horowitz's *The First Frontier,* a 1978 popular history of colonial Indian wars cited in Bourne's bibliography. According to Horowitz, "On one occasion, he [Philip] spoke openly of his feelings to a Rhode Island settler named John Borden," stating, "I am determined not to live till I have no country." Horowitz paraphrases the speech he ascribes to Philip, quoting only its closing line, and, like Bourne, he does not supply footnotes. Still, his bibliography points readers (and no doubt pointed Bourne) to the source he probably used: a set of documents in the 1885 volume of the *Collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society.* A footnote in that volume, in turn, refers readers to Samuel Greene Arnold's *History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations,* published in 1859. Both Arnold and the 1885 volume of the *Collections* cite the same archival source for the alleged speech: "Foster Papers, MSS, vol. ix. last page."

Housed in the dusty vaults of the Rhode Island Historical Society, those papers were left by Theodore Foster (1752–1828), a lawyer, antiquarian, and U.S. senator who, in his spare time, compiled a thick stack of notebooks for a history of Rhode Island that he never got around to writing. In one of those notebooks, Foster recorded a speech that he claimed had been made by Philip in 1675, evoking "the True Reason of this War," and originally transcribed, he said, by John Borden. "After it was generally reported that War was like to break out between the Indians and the English," he wrote, "Mr. John Borden who was intimately acquainted with Philip determined to persuade him to use his Endeavours for Peace and Amity urging the Reciprocal and Useful Benefits which must Result to Both Parties to which Philip replied in this striking Manner." Then comes a modernized version of Philip's speech, ending with the suspect sentence: "I am determined not to live till I have no country."

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Samuel Greene Arnold took Theodore Foster at his word, reproducing the speech in his 1859 history with only minor modifications, and without any proviso about authenticity. Most subsequent historians who have cited the speech have suggested, like Foster, that it constitutes the most authentic contemporary statement of the causes of King Philip's War (as opposed to the heavily biased and propagandistic accounts written by Puritan divines like Increase and Cotton Mather). But there is one notable exception to the otherwise unquestioned adoption of Foster's manuscript version as a genuine record of Philip's actual utterances. At the bicentennial anniversary of the town of Bristol, Rhode Island, in 1880, Brown University historian Jeremiah Lewis Diman gave an address in which he described and evaluated Foster's text in some detail:

> In the cabinet of the Rhode Island Historical Society there is preserved a curious paper which purports to give the substance of a reply made by Philip to his friend, John Borden, of Portsmouth, who sought to dissuade him from engaging in the war. The statement was not committed to writing till many years after the sachem's death, and cannot claim the authority of an historical document.

Diman also observed that the language of the text "belongs to a later period." Yet despite his caveats, he concluded that "undoubtedly [the speech] preserves the tradition respecting the causes of the war that lingered in Philip's own neighborhood, and among those who knew him best."

Whether or not the speech should be viewed as a plausible representation of Philip's motives depends on its authenticity. Alas, the paper trail vanishes once we trace it back to Foster's notes, probably written between 1803 and 1828. Foster never specified where he found John Borden's transcription of Philip's speech.

So who *was* Borden? Foster said only that he "then lived at Rhode Id.," though Diman would assert that he was from Portsmouth. Diman had done his homework: there was a John Borden living in Portsmouth in 1675, who served several times as a town deputy. It's conceivable that this prominent local man was involved in negotiations with Philip on the eve of the war. But John Borden is, I fear, a red herring.

One Englishman living in Rhode Island in 1675 *did* meet with Philip in June of that year, and he did record Philip's grievances against the English. That man's name was John *Easton.* A Quaker and deputy governor of Rhode Island, Easton wrote a detailed account of the meeting. He was sympathetic to Philip, and his report emphasized the unjustness with which Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay authorities had treated the Wampanoags. Perhaps hoping to elicit condemnation of the Puritan colonies, Easton sent a copy of his account to authorities in New York (where it remains today, in the New York State Archives). Sometime in 1675,

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another copy found its way to Boston, where Increase Mather read it with fury, declaring that Easton only "pretends to know the truth of things."

John Easton did not meet alone with Philip in June of 1675. Philip was attended by his counselors and some forty armed men, and Easton traveled with a party of five Englishmen, three of them magistrates. It is possible that John Borden of Portsmouth was a member of that delegation and that he, like Easton, made a record of the meeting. In 1913, Charles H. Lincoln, who transcribed Easton's manuscript for publication, maintained that "no other contemporary historian has given an account of this conference." But although no such document survives, it could have existed in Theodore Foster's lifetime and could have been lost or destroyed sometime between 1828 and 1913. Still, a more likely explanation is that Foster came across Easton's account and that he confused Easton and Borden. The two men's names might be almost indistinguishable if written in a sloppy or inky seventeenth-century cursive hand. But if Foster—or someone before him—misread "Easton" as "Borden," the question remains, How did Foster come across Easton's account in the first place? One possibility is that Foster saw a Rhode Island manuscript copy of Easton's account, or even Easton's original, which was later lost or destroyed. (As town clerk of Providence, Foster had access to a treasure trove of documents.) Or perhaps he derived his version of the speech from some earlier intermediate copyist who had seen the New York manuscript and had mixed up Easton and Borden—or whose handwriting was ambiguous enough to mislead Foster.

Though it is impossible to show how Foster gained access to Easton's account, textual evidence strongly suggests that he did. At first blush, Easton's seventeenth-century account of his conversation with Philip and Foster's nineteenth-century version of Philip's reply to John Borden seem quite different; but on closer inspection it seems to me that the latter is simply a heavily edited and embellished version of the former. A careful comparison suggests that Foster modernized Easton's idiosyncratic seventeenth-century spellings, updated his seventeenth-century prose, deleted the more minute details of Philip's grievances, and changed Easton's third-person voice to first-person. What was, in Easton's account, "thay saied when the English first Came their kings father was as a great man and the English as a litell Child" became, in Foster's revision, "My Father was also the Father of the English." Easton's Indians lodge lengthy, specific complaints against the English with the kind of breathless ranting one might expect from an injured party: "another greavanc was if 20 of there onest indians testefied that a Englishman had dun them rong, it was as nothing and if but one of ther worst indians testefied against ani indian or ther king when it plesed the English that was sufitiant." In Foster's version, Philip makes the same points (and in the same order), but more succinctly: "They tried my People by their own laws."

Foster's version is more coherent than Easton's rambling account of

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what must have been a long, tense, and difficult exchange. It is easy to understand why Foster felt compelled to modernize Easton's prose. Even in Foster's day, it would have seemed difficult. Yet in spite of his heavy editing and dramatic embellishments, Foster's restatement of Philip's speech still lacks literary or rhetorical flair, especially by early-nineteenth-century standards. That shortcoming may have led Foster to add an inspiring closing line, altogether invented and unlike anything in Easton's manuscript: "I am determined not to live till I have no country."

There are other reasons why Foster might have felt compelled to add this final line. It echoed the most quoted patriotic sentiments of his own day: Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death" and Nathan Hale's "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." Even more significant, perhaps, were the romantic strains of Rousseau's noble savage. In Foster's lifetime, Philip had come to be seen as an especially poetic example of the doomed chief, the "last of the Wampanoags," a patriot who gave his life in an effort to free his people from foreign tyranny. It is not surprising that Foster found Easton's first-hand account of difficult negotiations less satisfying than his own idealized vision of Philip. Irving, Cooper, Whittier, or Longfellow might have come up with a better and more grammatical line than "I am determined not to live till I have no country," but surely the sentiment would have been similar.

The ventriloquism that Theodore Foster performed provides a striking illustration of shifting notions of Indian speech. But more striking, perhaps, is the difficulty of imagining a similar range of remarks attributed to one of Philip's English neighbors—say, Cotton Mather. Mather's prose is not routinely modernized; his sermons are not rewritten to address contemporary concerns; his exhortations do not appear on billboards. Even eloquent patriots like Patrick Henry, whose words we still cite today, are not willfully modernized or deliberately misquoted. Their words, we believe, exist in time and in space; they are real, historical, written, and thus immutable.

As a result, historians can reliably know Cotton Mather and Patrick Henry in ways they cannot know King Philip. Until recently this inequity has occasioned little concern. Only in the last two decades have historians begun to devote close attention to Indian speeches. Early historians of the American experiment, much influenced by the nineteenth-century notion of the "vanished Indian," recounted the first centuries of European settlement in America as a story largely without Indians and wholly without Indian voices. Beginning in the 1970s, however, a new generation of scholars attempted to write Indians back into the story of early America, often placing them at center stage. In this more recent scholarship, Indians are neither absent nor passive, neither invisible nor doomed; they are adaptive, resilient, and often defiant.

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This remarkable return of the native has not been free of difficulties, and the problem of Indian speech is chief among them. Motivated by a profoundly different attitude toward documenting and interpreting the experiences of the native peoples of the Americas, our more recent historians have combed the archives in search of serviceable speeches—ones that would yield crisp, poignant, pithy quotations—often hoping to evoke the twin strains of native resistance and native survival. But the search has not always been fruitful. In *The Unredeemed Captive*—a wonderful, exhaustively researched account of an English captive who, growing up among the Mohawks, lost her command of English—John Demos was able to find only two words reliably recorded as having been spoken by his quasi-Indian protagonist. Asked if she would return home, the young woman declared, *"Jaghte oghte."* Inexactly translated by the Frenchman present as *"Peut-être que non"* and by the Englishman as "Maybe not," *"Jaghte oghte"* is not the richest of speeches. If recovering the words of an English captive (and a famous and important one at that) is so difficult, how much harder is it to recover the speech of ordinary Indians? Nonetheless, in a recent anthology subtitled *Indian Voices from Early America,* editor Colin G. Calloway is admirably optimistic about the search for Indian speech. "Indian people have certainly been deprived of their voices throughout much of American history," he concedes, "but anyone who has delved deeply into the records of early America knows that they were anything but silent. Many of their words survive for us today, if we know where to look for them and how to read them."

If. Where to look is, on the surface of things, fairly clear. Assiduous historians have found Indians speaking in court records, travelers' accounts, deeds, correspondence, and government records. How to read these sources, however, is far more complicated. Some Indians in early America were literate English speakers, and many of their written (and occasionally printed) works have been productively explored. Yet even when Indians did learn to read and write, the resulting archives do not necessarily serve historians well. Since literacy was often a last step in the path toward acculturation, educated Indians may not have been the most authentic spokespeople for their more numerous nonliterate countrymen, whose voices survive only in poor transcriptions. Recorded Indian speech is also plagued by the interference and inventions of an army of interpreters, many of them hostile. These problems, however, are not specific to Indian evidence. Transcription is a problem all social historians must contend with; since many non-Indians in early America (the woefully labeled "inarticulate") were also illiterate, their speech, too, survives only as recorded by others. Because America has always been a polyglot nation, translations affect a great deal of historical scholarship. Yet the one problem unique to Indian evidence is the most pernicious: words uttered by Indians were written down by people who held dubious notions about their capacity

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for language and about what their speech should look like on paper.

The cult of the eloquent savage, in particular, has had one especially dire consequence: it has fetishized Indian illiteracy. Intent on admiring Indian oratory, white Americans consigned Indians to perpetual orality. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the case of the Cherokee. When, in 1821, the Cherokee genius Sequoyah singlehandedly devised a syllabic writing system for the Cherokee tongue, chroniclers of his invention described his initial fascination with the white man's books, or, as Sequoyah is always alleged to have called them, their "talking leaves." In highlighting Sequoyah's naïve, childlike fascination with talking leaves, such writers celebrated not his literacy but his orality (and thereby employed what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has called "the trope of the talking book," a common convention in slave narratives). Despite his phenomenal literacy, despite his virtual invention of writing, even an Indian like Sequoyah continued to be understood as a fundamentally oral (and metaphorical) thinker.

Meanwhile, Sequoyah and others like him who resisted English language or alphabetic literacy remain inaccessible to most historians. In the early 1820s, the Massachusetts philologist John Pickering, working with a Christianized Cherokee, devised an orthographic system (based on the Roman alphabet) for the Cherokee language; but as Pickering's *Cherokee Grammar* went to press, news of Sequoyah's syllabic system arrived in Boston. To Pickering's dismay, the Cherokee people universally preferred Sequoyah's syllabary to Pickering's alphabet. "Tell them now of printing in any other character," the missionary Samuel Worcester wrote in 1827, "and you throw cold water on the fire you are trying to kindle. To persuade them to learn that other would be in general a hopeless task." Pickering acknowledged that the Cherokees' preference for the syllabary might be explained by its "greater convenience," but surmised that their partiality had more to do with their "national pride." What Pickering saw as the syllabary's greatest weakness was, to the Cherokees, its greatest strength: it isolated them from whites, hardly any of whom could read it.

By any standard of historical evidence, writings in the Cherokee syllabary are the most authentic kind of Indian source. But since few historians have learned Indian languages, not many have mined those writings. Instead, the cultural and linguistic isolation Sequoyah himself had hoped for has proved long-lived. Though anthropologists and linguists have studied native languages and writing systems, historians have only rarely explored this multilingual territory (in spite of the so-called linguistic turn in historical studies). Unaware of documents written with Indian writing systems, or at least unable to read them, American historians remain dependent on questionable English transcriptions.

Jaghte oghte. Maybe not. Maybe it's not as easy to find Indian voices as some historians would have us believe. There are practical hurdles: the assimilated perspective of most literate Indians, the often fanciful tran-

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scription and translation of speech recorded by non-Indians, and the foreignness of Indian languages and native writing systems. Historians do not generally embrace documents of dubious provenance, but these obstacles have led us to cast our nets wider than usual and to adopt less rigid standards for Indian evidence. And of course, the idealization of Indian orality plays a crucial role. Theodore Foster, who considered himself a historian, did not hesitate to modernize and transform a much earlier account because he held certain ideas about Indian speech. And our own inheritance of those ideas, combined with our commitment to Indian voices, has helped usher "I am determined not to live . . ." into the Peabody Museum and a best-selling history textbook.

Unlike Chief Seattle's "The earth is our mother," King Philip's alleged words have not become the mantra of an entire political movement. Although many Indian activists have been inspired by Philip's speech, its brand of patriotism is not in vogue in the rest of America. But even if Philip's words are not as widely quoted as Chief Seattle's, they do have a distinct, if somewhat narrow, political appeal. The Peabody Museum curator, the bronze sculptor, the King Philip's War novelist, the textbook author—all use the speech to portray a native defiance that resonates with the politics of Indian identity in contemporary American culture.

Those who quote Philip's spurious speech are also motivated by the hope of finding more native voices to balance a historical narrative dominated by the sermons of Puritan ministers and government agents. This is so admirable a motive that I suspect some historians might argue that perpetuating the speech is defensible, given the paucity of Indian sources and the theoretical possibility that Foster used an authentic source. Perhaps someone may yet discover a seventeenth-century Borden manuscript. If such a manuscript did come to light, it would offer an almost unparalleled opportunity to compare how two contemporary Englishmen heard and recorded an Indian's speech. I suspect we would also find that Foster greatly updated Borden's account. But unless that account appears, Foster's closing line must be rejected as a fabrication. Rather than lowering our standards of documentary authenticity to admit previously unheard voices, we should raise the bar.

All of us would do well to heed Philip himself. In Tom Sancsuik's letter of 1671, Philip tells the governor of Plymouth, "He will come as sune as possible he can to speak with you." Until Philip can speak to us—until we find authentic documents or better ways of reading the ones we have—there is no more room in his mouth for our wigwam words.

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How Does It Come Out?

RUTH GAY

In 1937, when I was fifteen and in love with Ronald Colman, I saw *The Prisoner of Zenda.* During an elaborate dueling scene, as gracefully choreographed as an Astaire-Rogers dance number, Colman and his opponent fight their way around a gloomy castle, swerving around the ropes that control the drawbridge, leaping off tables, and moving up stairs without so much as a backward glance. At one point Colman slips through a door and closes it behind him. When his adversary catches up with him and taunts him for his seeming cowardice, Colman replies gaily, "'He who fights and runs away . . . '—you know."

Alas, I didn't know. And that was the beginning, for me, of a lifelong search. I was the child of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, growing up in a densely Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx; my exposure to the rhymes, the proverbs, the folk sayings of the English-speaking world was all a matter of happenstance. My friends and I read voraciously in an unending effort to unravel the mysteries of the strange culture in which we had landed. It was clear that we could not ask our parents for explanations, since the American scene was even more mysterious to them than it was to us. And we were much too shy and fearful of authority to ask our teachers. So we studied the world around us closely, carefully, often coming to very false conclusions. Yet we remained convinced that diligence and the New York Public Library would ultimately reveal all.

I knew that, in time, I would find the missing ending of Ronald Colman's rhyme. It was reassuring that English-language culture did seem to be a closed system. Vast, but ultimately bounded. It was astonishing how often the same names, the same book titles would appear and reap-

Ruth Gay, a frequent contributor, is the author of *The Jews of Germany: A Historical Portrait* and *Unfinished People: Eastern European Jews Encounter America.* Her new book, *Doing the Unthinkable: Jews in Germany after 1945,* is forthcoming from Yale University Press.

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pear on the printed page, as if in a kaleidoscope where a few fractured elements are constantly recomposed to make new patterns. So I was confident that, with a little patience and close attention, I would eventually hear the end of Colman's tantalizing phrase.

The way to manage all these fragments, I had learned, was to treat the world as a giant mosaic. Eventually two seemingly unrelated pieces would fit together, and suddenly one corner or a section of that inexplicable world would begin to take on a meaningful form. Decades after that Saturday afternoon at the movies, I heard the concluding line of the couplet:

> He who fights and runs away
> Lives to fight another day.

A folk saying, obviously. It perfectly completed that scene in *The Prisoner of Zenda* and was in character for the ever debonair, witty, quick-thinking Ronald Colman. I started using the rhyme myself at what seemed appropriate moments, with a Colman lift of the eyebrow.

The year 1999 turned out to be the time when lots of these stray, orphaned shards began coming together—but rather than resolving my questions, the conjunctions only posed new ones. I was in Berlin during the summer and was glancing through a magazine published for Jewish refugees returning to the city for a visit. Suddenly, I was electrified to see at the end of one article, appropriately titled "Entronnen" (Escaped), the following German quatrain:

> Wer kämpft und läuft davon
> kann wieder fangen an;
> Wer untergeht, bleibt liegen,
> und kann nie wieder siegen.

Accompanying it was the attribution "Oliver Goldsmith."

For more than half a century, I had been living in a fool's paradise. Here was my rhyme, which I felt that I owned, that I had personally captured, and it was not a folk saying after all! Nor was it a couplet, but a whole quatrain! Would I now finally track down the full context of that single line that had been such a symbol to me for decades—a symbol of how immigrant persistence would eventually bring Western civilization to its knees? Until that summer day in Berlin, 1999 had seemed such a good year for putting together pieces of my mosaic.

But now I had a secret resource, unavailable when I was a teenager. I telephoned my Harvard-educated daughter, a specialist in English literature, who was able to give me immediately the complete verse, in English.

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He who fights and runs away
Lives to fight another day.
But he who is in battle slain
Can never rise and fight again.

The source was Goldsmith's *The Art of Poetry on a New Plan,* 1761. My daughter was further able to trace the idea back to the Greek poet Menander, showing that I had not wasted my adoration for Ronald Colman—who proved to be not only glamorous but also a thoroughly cultivated gentleman—and that I hadn't wasted my money in sending my daughter to Harvard.

On that same trip to Germany, I spent a few days in Munich. One afternoon, sitting at a tea table, one of the guests started talking about the famously stolid nature of Bavarian peasants, and their pride in their dialect. He illustrated his observations with a story. Two peasants are crossing a bridge and hear someone in the water calling out in High German, "*Hilfe, hilfe!*" (Help, help!). They continue walking, as one observes, "He should have learned to speak Bavarian." "No," says the other, "he should have learned to swim."

For me, this anecdote had a delicious overtone. In the 1930s, when German Jews began to arrive as refugees in Palestine, they had a notoriously hard time learning Hebrew. One of the stories demonstrating their plight tells of two native-born, Hebrew-speaking Jews sitting on the beach at Haifa and hearing a man in the water, waving and calling: "*Hilfe, hilfe. . . .*" The reader can supply the rest of the anecdote. But what a marvelous moment it was, in a Munich living room in 1999, to learn at last the ancestry of that ancient joke, told so often, so wryly, a half-century earlier in German refugee circles in Israel.

My year of wonders was not over. Another empty space in my mosaic remained to be filled. A rhyme that I once heard often occurs to me when I'm in Germany. I am reminded of it, tantalizingly, in restaurants at the moment when we are ordering wine or water or both. As it had been recited to me by a German psychoanalyst in New Haven, the rhyme noted that fish, which drank only water, were mute (*stumm*), while gentlemen at table who drank only wine became silly (*dumm*). And therefore, according to the concluding couplet, if one wished to be neither, one should mix one's wine with water. What charmed me when I first heard the poem was how neatly the verses were turned. But the psychoanalyst who had passed on the rhyme had long since died, and I was left with an inaccurate fragment in my memory. On that summer trip to Munich, I found myself once again in a restaurant; and since it was lunchtime, a number of us decided against wine and opted for water. Once again the old verses came to me, and I asked the assembled company—a group of editors, as

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it happened—about them. It was as if I had asked an English-speaking group for the source of "To be or not to be . . . " Everyone knew at once that it came from the Auerbach's Keller scene in *Faust*, and to my great delight I was regaled with all of Goethe's delicious verses:

Wasser ohne Wein macht stumm
das beweisen im Teiche die Fische.
Wein ohne Wasser macht dumm
das beweisen die Herren am Tische.
Da ich beides nicht möchte sein
Misch ich das Wasser mit dem Wein.

There was only one problem. I now had the six lines of the poem, but when I got back home and assiduously checked my *Faust*, there was no such quotation. A quick appeal via fax and phone to various German-speaking literary experts—in New Haven, in Berlin, in Munich—were all unavailing.

Has the time come, then, for a new American strategy? Instead of waiting for Providence to send the answers like manna falling from heaven, maybe I should boot up my computer, turn on the search engines, and find the answer to every outstanding question, complete all the unfinished rhymes, discover the source of every quotation. No more uncertainty. No more mystery.

Yet it seems almost heartless not to allow happenstance, an overheard phrase, the vagaries of new encounters to bring about the shock of recognition, or perhaps to pose new questions, to uncover delectable new pathways of speculation and expectation. Life without suspense? Is that what we want? I must confess that I've so enjoyed the moments of discovery, always appearing unexpectedly, like gift-wrapped surprises, that I'm hesitant to substitute the grimly planned search. Would I have been a happier teenager if I had known all of Oliver Goldsmith's quatrain? Now that I've learned that Goethe is *not* the author of my "wine and water" poem, does it matter which lesser poet put it together?

I want to make the argument for the creative force of a little uncertainty. It fuels the imagination and makes the world a more compelling place. It also forces on us a sense of responsibility, requiring the utmost vigilance and attentiveness, since at any moment, in the most unlikely settings, a lifelong puzzle can be resolved. It is all too possible to go about in a fog of self-absorption. Far better to recognize the outside world, that living and breathing organism that throws out questions and at some point offers the answers. Attention must be paid!

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In the Forum

SUE STANDING

Nothing will make us present tense.
Like an agora with nothing to sell,
the past gives up its chips of marble,
broken pediments, headless statues.
No way of knowing whether the fragments
are put together right,
but the forms the particles take

give shape to shapeless lives like our own.
The risks we're taking aren't really risks.
Orange trees. Umbrella pines. Wisteria.
A drift of nuns and school children.
A scattering of pensioners who get in free.
We look down into the Circus Maximus,
emptied of almost all its obelisks.

From the Farnese gardens, we descend
into the House of Livia—
the painted walls so chicly decomposed
a stage designer would kill for that effect.
A drama of betrayal would be perfect
set against that fractured sky—
love stretched thinner than a wishbone.

Sue Standing is Professor of English and Director of the Creative Writing Program at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. Her most recent collection of poems is *Gravida*; a new collection is forthcoming from Four Way Books.

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A Voice (Up Comes)

LISA CRONEBERG

Soon from the balcony I start to think I hear important things—
I'm all swell and
        wane and
                wax—contagion—now I'm too simple for suspicion.
Meanwhile
        murmuring,
you've nothing more than slippage to report
        of sand and shell and roughage,
                of little wind off a far-off flatline
        over curve
invisible.

In short:

Waves. I know your
        (show up.
                mesmerize millions.)
                        secret

(We're like you . . .
        We're like you . . .
                We're like you . . .)

conspiring to make consciousness undead before my eyes—

flippant descriers of equivalence—

Lisa Croneberg's work has appeared in *Chelsea* and is forthcoming in *Ploughshares.*

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Old Age and Frustration

HAROLD ORLANS

More than half a century ago, as a participant in a graduate research seminar, I undertook, in all innocence, a literature review on infant care. It appeared in a scholarly journal and became assigned reading in some child-development courses. For a time, I was considered an authority on nursing, weaning, and potty training. An evaporated milk company offered me a job; a humorous drawing illustrating a *Life* magazine article on child care displayed my name on the bottom of a stack of books and Freud's on the top.

The next year, my newborn daughter demonstrated how little I really knew about babies by bawling healthily, night or day, as the spirit moved her. She thus added parental fatigue, which I had completely overlooked, to the equation of baby care.

When I wrote that paper, my ideas about old age were as abstract and uninformed by experience as they were about infants. I had seen old people close up—my grandparents, my father. As a conscientious objector during World War II, I had tended hospitalized old men, watched a dozen die, prepared their bodies, and, in the quiet night, accompanied them to the hospital morgue on a horse-drawn wagon. But I did not understand their condition. My youthful view of the aged resembled a visitor's view of prisoners: they were jailed in the wrinkled bars of age; I was free.

During the last six decades, Harold Orlans has held a variety of positions, including Reporter for the *San Francisco Call Bulletin*; Analyst for the National Science Foundation; Director of Studies for the White House Conference on Children and Youth; Visiting Associate at Harvard University; Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution; Special Assistant to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights; and Editor of the *Independent Scholar*.

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Death I thought I understood. It can be met at any age—look at Rwanda, Hiroshima, Pompeii, infant mortality, daily events; look at the obituary page. Death requires no preparation, no education: a mouse dies as consummately as Socrates. "If you do not know how to die," Montaigne counsels, "do not let it trouble you; Nature will give you full and sufficient instructions when the time comes. She will do the business for you." Death is our animal destiny, that of the squashed squirrels on suburban streets and the anonymous generations removed from spacious lodgings to crowded cemeteries.

But what being old felt like I did not know. Now that I am five years older than my father was half a century ago, let me try to say what I have learned or, should I say, experienced, because the essential qualities of age are not abstract truths but clear or muddy feelings.

One pervasive feeling is, strangely, the same as the one I had when my daughter was a fresh, plump baby: fatigue. "Our little life is rounded with a sleep" puts it well. At seventy-nine, I nap after lunch and sleep longer at night: nine hours is good, ten is best; if it's eight or seven, the day is spoiled. A fog descends; reading makes little sense, writing less; even modest labor (weeding or collecting fallen branches) is impractical. My bedtime is 10:00, 9:30, or 9:00. The child emerges from shortening sleeps; the old submerge in lengthening ones. Sleep lengthens the night, shortens the evening, and nips bits from the afternoon. The morning remains intact, prime time for work; deciding what should be done then or put off for another morning shapes the remains of my scholarly life.

Fatigue is gentle, seldom severe, because, despite the admonitions of doctors and fitness counselors, I do not exercise. Many days I leave the house only to fetch the morning paper at the foot of the drive, deposit garbage in the outside bin, fill the bird feeders, or buy food, gas, and stamps. My English brother-in-law declared, "The body gives up only if you give up on it." He played cricket, walked madly around the countryside, could name every bird and bush, and died of the same colon cancer as my non-exercising brother. To my mind, exercise squanders precious energy. My chief movements are walking up and down the half flights of our four-level home, patrolling supermarket aisles, washing dishes, and turning the pages of books. When my thirty-seven-year-old son invited me to help clean his greenhouse, I realized that he was as ignorant of age as I had once been. I was surprised at how well my wife and I held up, the last two Christmases, in long walks around Rome, Pompeii, and Herculaneum, but they generated real fatigue and heavy sleep.

My sleep has deepened; sometimes it is overpowering. I do not greet the New Year; that wretchedly noisy event can manage without me. Shakespeare and Bach must be performed at matinees. To stay awake until 11:00 after dinner with friends is to battle something stronger than

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drowsiness: my eyes tear, I am pulled downward and inward, the guests buzz away, I struggle with fuzzy demons. Deprived long enough, soldiers fall asleep on a thundering battlefield. I understand that now. Sleep is as essential as water.

But let me step back from (I will return to) this sleepy scene to my 1986 retirement at a youthful sixty-five. No nodding evenings then, no afternoon naps. The world was young. It sounds ridiculous, but age is comparative. My wife, Kay, who is eight years younger than I, I call my child bride. I leave a two-hour TV film in midcourse, at 10:00; she stays and reports the ending at breakfast. In my teens, the youngest in the gang on the block, I was called Little Kid; at college, Childe Harold. Now, the oldest at many gatherings, I note anyone near my age as a wary swimmer notes a raft. That is also ridiculous, because I don't feel old. My energetic mother said the same in her late eighties.

Why does the present—the fat gray squirrel heading down the tree trunk, who just stopped, hind legs splayed, head thrust forward horizontally, his splendid tail, flag of his squirrelhood, swishing—intrude? Proust must have imagined it all; my past is largely irrecoverable. I have a poor memory and keep no diary. The garden scene is rich, the past skeletally thin.

My last job before retirement was at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights during Reagan's presidency, doing a study of affirmative action in higher education. It had not gone well. I have conducted social or policy research at a dozen nonprofit and government agencies; the commission was by far the worst. The liberal and conservative factions distrusted each other and passed damaging information to congressmen and the press. The new director cut the budget. Returning from holiday, I found that he had killed my study and given me three months' notice. Instead of anger, I felt relief, as if I had been released from solitary confinement.

Leaving the commission, I looked for other work, failed, and filed for unemployment benefits. I waited my turn, filled out forms, was interviewed, and leafed through a thick looseleaf book full of irrelevant job listings. At best, looking for a job is distasteful; at worst, like hitting yourself on the head with a mallet. I became isolated and disillusioned. Once I wrote a letter requesting the advice of a man I knew well and respected. Little happened in our common fields of interest that he did not know. He never answered my letter. Maybe he never saw it. Maybe I should have written again or phoned instead of feeling hurt. But I didn't feel casual at the time.

The unemployment benefits were small but reliable and reassuring; they acknowledged my existence, and I thanked Franklin Roosevelt for them. As they drew to a close, my sixty-fifth birthday approached. Surely,

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retirement was preferable to unemployment; both my status and income would rise. With my wife still working, our finances were satisfactory; the unpleasant job search would end, and I could turn my attention to—what? My course was clear if, it may be, foolish.

Since I read *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in 1936, at fifteen, I had been intrigued by T. E. Lawrence. His forceful, searching prose and self-lacerating honesty were compelling—"coercive," Irving Howe said. His forsaking fame for life in barracks showed a man driven by conscience, not power or applause. Hardy, Shaw, Forster, Graves, and Malraux were all fascinated by Lawrence. "While he lived," Eugene O'Neill declared, "one could believe that true honor and courage and integrity were still alive among the leaders of men."

The more I read about Lawrence, the more puzzling he became. Was he a real or a dubious hero, strong-minded and independent or emotionally disturbed? Of the idols of my boyhood, he alone survived. Now that I was free to do what I pleased, I resolved to write a book about his character. Surely, its enigmas contained a clue to my own changing character over the half century that had passed since I first encountered him; I recognized features with which I identified as well as those I lacked and envied.

I have had a peripatetic intellectual history, moving from one subject to another. Accidents were partly responsible; so were an overly wide range of interests and a feeling that a new topic must yield significant truths that a familiar one no longer offered. I have long felt that whatever I might learn and say about a subject was best learned and said in the first attack; thereafter, the intellectual return would diminish and my time would be better devoted to another subject. So I moved from infant care to community studies to social aspects of town planning to federal research policies to educational accrediting to adjustment to hearing loss. . . . The clear truths I sought were always muffled, complex, indistinct. Lawrence was simply another truth awaiting investigation.

Or was he? What I had done, in blissful ignorance, was to cross from social and policy studies, where information is either in the public domain or generated by the investigator, to contemporary biography and literature, where vital information is privately owned. I had left a familiar scene, whose sources, scholars, ideas, and publications I knew, for one I did not know and where I was unknown. I was like a fledgling graduate student enrolled in no department with no advisers and no fellow students.

The other great transformation was the move from office to home, from an institutional affiliation to a blank letterhead. No longer did an institution (Brookings, a congressional committee, even the God-forsaken civil rights commission) certify my standing and provide the armory of services and supplies that equip modern researchers: office, staff, colleagues, mail, phone, typewriter or computer, library. I had to establish

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my own office; acquire, successively, an electric typewriter, word processor, computer, printer, copier; become my own secretary; visit post offices and office suppliers; subscribe to two dozen journals; buy reference books.

The feeling of comradeship, of belonging to a community of scholars, was gone. I joined historical and literary associations and attended their conferences. Meetings of Lawrence addicts in Oxford and the Los Angeles area were helpful, but insufficiently stimulating; they were occasions for remembrance, not analysis and discussion. The National Coalition of Independent Scholars had its uses. For a period I edited its newsletter, but in time its aggravations exceeded its rewards. Many members criticized academics for their herdlike mentality, yet envied their security and perquisites.

Lawrence's writings were owned by a trust whose key figure, his youngest brother Arnold, vigilantly guarded his reputation. Access to the reserved collection of Lawrence's letters in the Bodleian Library had been denied to scholars whom Arnold suspected of wicked thoughts, especially the suspicion that Lawrence was homosexual. To enhance the chance of admission, I decided to edit a collection of Lawrence's literary criticism, an unimpeachably safe topic, while simultaneously working on a study of his character. I stated my two purposes honestly.

The strategy, but little else, succeeded. I expected to edit the thin set of literary reviews and essays in three months and believed that the name of Lawrence would ensure publication. The work took three years. Two scholars who read a draft said it was too thin. So I repaired to the Bodleian and, endlessly twisting my pencils in the library's tiny handheld sharpener, I fattened my manuscript from eighty to three hundred pages with extracts from Lawrence's letters arranged to show his literary views and illuminate facets of his character.

When the book was ready, I asked half the publishers in the English-speaking world if they were interested. They answered no or NO or did not answer. A reader at Jonathan Cape, the prime publisher of Lawrenciana, found it "surprisingly interesting" but commercially unviable. Athlone Press accepted it conditional upon a £10,000 subsidy. I was ready to sign with the University Press of America, which required camera-ready copy (cost, about $2,000) and a bookstore order for one hundred copies that I would have to guarantee against loss.

But first I phoned the University of Delaware Press, which had held the manuscript for four months. Yes, I was told, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press would take it. Fairleigh Dickinson? The explanation was Associated University Presses, which provides central production and distribution services for a dozen small institutional presses. Its managing director knew something about Lawrence and Middle Eastern affairs, knew that Fairleigh Dickinson might be interested, and knew a reader

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who praised the manuscript more highly than I would: "[I]t presents a fuller picture of Lawrence than has ever been possible through other means . . . an intellectual biography that in many ways surpasses existing ones. . . . I have no doubt that this collection . . . will be widely reviewed and quoted."

It wasn't. Only two significant reviews appeared. *The Times Literary Supplement* reviewer was appreciative. *Lawrence of Arabia, Strange Man of Letters* was, he said, "more than just a compilation of letters and criticism; it is a guide and a series of indicators to the complex character of the man. . . . Orlans has . . . shown us here, better than in all the biographies, the pulsing heart of Lawrence." The reviewer in *English Literature in Transition,* an English professor I knew, spent half his space criticizing the subtitle—Lawrence, he said, was no stranger than Swinburne or Kafka. He disputed my remark that textual exegesis was "the occupational disease of English departments" and thought my admission to have lost the source of a letter "a bit odd." Evidently English professors either never lose a source or do not admit it.

Thus, my entrance to the outer foyer of literary studies was as little noted as my departure. My entrance to the mansion of biography has yet to be announced, but I have gained enough experience to share Freud's view that "anyone who writes a biography is committed to . . . hiding his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth does not exist."

The number of people who have written about Lawrence must outnumber the Bedouin he led. Many regard him reverently as greatly gifted, near saintly; others, as a poseur, the fabricator of his own myth. For my next project, I thought it would be instructive to see how opposing biographers would answer basic questions: Was Lawrence a real hero in the desert war? Was he fundamentally honest? Modest or vain? What was the nature of his sexuality? Can these questions be resolved by evidence?

After George Simson, editor of *Biography,* agreed that the idea was worth pursuing, I invited leading authorities to respond to the foregoing questions. Six submitted useful answers (three pro, three con). In September 1991, the symposium was accepted for publication. "We look forward to seeing your work in print" but "have a year's backlog of accepted manuscripts." Nonetheless, "Please let us know if you change your address for longer than two weeks."

In July 1992, I inquired about the publication date and was told "possibly" January 1993. In February, I inquired again. Simson bemoaned the growing backlog. He "accommodated young people up for tenure," but in my case, "The real question . . . is whether there is some need for timeliness that I am not aware of." I asked, "Are you unaware of death? Mousa [Suleiman Mousa, one of the symposium's contributors] is well on in years; I will soon be seventy-two. We may never see this symposium or be able to discuss it with our colleagues." This elicited the news that it

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would appear in the July 1993 issue. All editors should be so solicitous of their crotchety contributors. I wish I could say that the symposium *was* discussed.

I rank myself among Lawrence's unreverential friends, albeit my boyhood admiration now mixes with pity. Lawrence's conviction of the futility of human action was all the more impressive because of his power of will and manipulation. However, what I once thought was freedom now seems emotional compulsion. Remarks on heterosexual sex that I once thought perceptive now seem adolescent, wrong. Acts that once seemed sardonic now appear unhealthy, even coprophilic.

I wrote my dissertation in three months; my first book also took three months. In those days, I wrote five pages a day, day after day. In 1967, I conducted for a congressional committee an evaluation of federal social research programs. I sent inquiries to the heads of major programs and private research organizations, leading social and natural scientists, foundation officers, university officials. The report was published in four volumes, twenty-three hundred pages. I did the job alone in three months with the help of a good secretary, a robotype machine, and the committee letterhead.

By the time I started my Lawrence biography, a page was a decent day's output. Reduced work hours were not the sole reason. My mode of thought had changed—I hope the right word is not *deteriorated.* Everything seemed related to everything else; it was harder to decide which path to take, and the likelihood of a repetition or impasse had grown. Formerly, the lines of presentation were clear, and I proceeded steadily, depositing fact, argument, and footnotes along the way. It may be rationalization to defend the slow flow of words, but I would argue that blinders are necessary for intellectual productivity. The more complete and complex is your grasp of reality, the harder is it to convey that grasp in words. In a lifetime, Rousseau, as eloquent as any philosopher, could not convey the vision that seized him under a tree on the way to Vincennes.

The chronological story of Lawrence's life posed little difficulty, but how was I to examine his character while telling his story? Character endures or develops on its own uncalendric schedule. My solution was to split the work into two parts: life and (the longer part) aspects of character. Aspects, as his character was neither one clear whole nor clearly bifurcated but fractured and fragmented. John Mack, whose 1976 biography looks closely at Lawrence's character and sexuality, adopted a somewhat similar approach.

Eleven years after deciding to do the biography, I completed the manuscript of *A Broken Hero: The Life and Character of Lawrence of Arabia* (355 pages, text; 113, notes and bibliography). The title came from Robert Graves's remark that Lawrence was "a broken hero who tried

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to appear whole." Again I faced the unappetizing search for a publisher. Policy projects had come with a publisher attached (Brookings, the Government Printing Office) or grant money to secure one. I was on my own here. Would a publisher leap at this biography or would the aggravations of *Strange Man of Letters* be repeated?

The cost of permissions had to be considered. I have always used a lot of quotations. If that is a bad habit, I share it with Montaigne. Quotation conveys style and thought far better than paraphrase. Drawn from questionnaires or interviews, it presents no problem; drawn from unpublished letters or contemporary publications, it is costly. The Lawrence trust had halved its usual charge for the quotations in my edited collection, because I received no royalties on the first eight hundred copies (to date, it has sold five hundred). I hoped the biography would do better, and that would make the quotations more expensive. Hence, I hoped for a trade publisher. Surely, the name Lawrence of Arabia was salable?

Trade publishers may mill around established authors, celebrities, presidents, and their paramours, but not nameless writers. You must get a literary agent, I was told—but not how to get one. Agents are as choosy as publishers. A friend who has published two well-received biographies gave me his agent's name. I wrote; she asked for a proposal. I replied, "Why should anyone . . . prefer an author's self-promotion to his own judgment?"—and sent her a proposal. The agent responded: "You make Lawrence of Arabia sound absolutely fascinating. . . . However, . . . I'm rather daunted by the number of Lawrence biographies . . . still in print. . . . I'm going to have to pass, with enormous regret. In a different publishing climate, I would be begging for the manuscript."

A second agent had the same reaction. Caesar would have been delighted to be stabbed so flatteringly: "I was very impressed with both the scope and depth of your investigation, and the quality of your writing. You have a gift for the written word, and I feel lucky that you considered me. . . . I will, unfortunately, have to pass. . . . I'm a bit worried that the market for the book just isn't as commercial as I'd like."

The third agent said it would be "a hard sell," yet he would try. I spent several weeks revising the proposal until he and his associate were satisfied. Kinko's produced two dozen copies of the forty-five-page, spiral-bound opus with a picture of Lawrence, in Arab robes, on the cover. These were deposited on the desks of senior New York editors. Weeks, months passed. I would phone the associate, a pleasant, able, busy young woman; she would phone New York. A few editors were interested; a few asked questions: "What is new about this book and why is there a need for it?" "What is the current interest in Lawrence?" "How do you appraise previous biographies?" Two or three went so far as to read the entire manuscript. One took it with him on holiday and probably left it there: it's pretty heavy. I had five copies made at forty dollars apiece. One was returned.

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After eleven months of mutual aggravation, twenty-three publishers had rejected the manuscript. None said why, doubtless to protect their secrets of divination. The very last editor sent an explanation:

> The straight biography is rich and narrative-driven, and I could easily have read an entire manuscript that continued in this way. It's in Part II that the nature of the work changes abruptly and becomes less satisfying to the general reader. . . . [It] has the feeling of a collection of essays. . . . [W]hile this almost workbook approach may be useful in the university it's less attractive to the general reader. . . . I would be happy to read an integrated biography. . . . The door is not fully closed.

That was a very fair analysis and I could not dispute his judgment. However, I was not inclined, nor did I know how, to integrate the two parts.

My agent and I parted on friendly terms, and my thoughts turned toward Britain, where my first book had been published in 1953. Was the agent who handled it still alive? Would he take this one? The answers were yes and yes. One of the pleasures of Britain is how much it lags behind the States. The following differences between U.S. and British practice can be noted: the British agent required no proposal; at least two people read the manuscript before he accepted it; he sent it to one publisher at a time, which "avoids the embarrassment if two people should make the same offer" (we should only be so embarrassed); the publisher returned the manuscript, so only one copy was needed (lacking our forests, the British are more niggardly with paper); a brief explanation accompanied each rejection (Britain retains courtesies we have long abandoned).

It usually takes a month to get a reaction. Thus far, I have had three: (1) "It's certainly a labour of love, but I'm afraid I did not think it striking enough to make much headway—and there is, after all, a lot about on the man." (2) "It is marvellous how timeless T. E. Lawrence is, and that in a way is the problem. We publish _____'s biography . . . and I sadly doubt we could accommodate Professor Orlans' book." (I am not a professor.) (3) "I can't fail to be impressed by the prodigious research effort . . . but I wonder if the approach is a little academic for a trade publisher. . . . Somewhat regretfully I will pass." That makes three passes. Editors must play a lot of poker.

I wonder if *A Broken Hero* will be published in my lifetime or posthumously.

Books enable you to join, leave, or make a friend at will. A few familiar books ease the strangeness of new places; reading takes your mind off anxieties and perplexities and fosters the illusion of stability, order, completion, the possibility of solid achievement amid life's uncertainties and

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certain fatality. A book seems self-contained, permanent, unchangeable. Open it years later and you wonder how—can even forget that—you wrote it. The elderly Tolstoy heard a story being read, listened, and said "That is good," without realizing that he had written it.

I am not very learned and a poor memory dissipates much that I have learned. All I retain of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* is one sentence; of many (most?) other books, less. That is true of the works of anthropology I studied in graduate school (Boas, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Kroeber) and the literature I read in the 1930s (Wassermann, London, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, Thomas Wolfe) and more recently (Dostoyevsky, Conrad, Stendahl, Flaubert, Melville). However, I retain a broad sense of what each anthropologist stood for and the general quality and mood of each writer. The writers I know best (much, not all, of Montaigne, Shakespeare, Tolstoy) I reread and mark, so that I can more readily find pregnant passages. Sadly (the fault is mine and theirs), I reread no scholar in any field I have practiced. For an argument or insight, some scholars (Boas, Lynd, Merton, Freud, and, of course, Tocqueville) are permanently useful; to illustrate intellectual folly, I turn to those who boost science as Babbitt boosted business (Mead, Murdock, J. B. Watson, almost any *Science* editor or National Academy of Sciences president).

Last year, I bought Dreyfus's *History of the Nonesuch Press* and discovered I already had a copy and had read it. Sorting notes, I often find multiple copies of the same quotation that I have made at different times from the same or different sources. I can misplace a note I am working with, and cannot for the life of me find in a book a necessary passage I know by heart—until one day, when I am not looking for it, it turns up. The same thing happens constantly with my glasses and the plant moisture meter. The name of a friend or relative can disappear at the worst moment, so that I must fudge my conversation. A poor memory has advantages: it inhibits premature conclusions and keeps you open to new facts, ideas, and books. Your mind may be a sieve, but wherever you turn, the world of culture lies green and fresh before you. I can well understand those who, all their lives, read only the Bible, starting again at the beginning whenever they finish. They must see new things on each reading, while familiar passages solidify their convictions.

Lawrence wanted to die young and succeeded at forty-six. I can't say when I want to die. "Never" is unrealistic; an exact date, meaningless, since one can want to die in certain circumstances but not at an abstract time (though no doubt someone found it meaningful to die precisely at the new millennium). *Lord let me know mine end, and the number of my days: that I may be certified how long I have to live.* "Of all prayers this is the insanest," Samuel Butler wrote. I do not incline to suicide; two distraught sisters, mine and my wife's, have made sufficient contributions to that cause.

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The unquenchable thirst for knowledge and the irrational assurance that knowledge is good (why else thirst for it?) or at least better than ignorance conflicts with elementary facts we try to avoid. Who thirsts to know he is unloved, unsuccessful, unattractive, unnecessary? That his career has been mediocre, his weaknesses scorned? That he is over the hill and jolting downward? Who sees himself as we see squirrels and blackbirds, one of a nameless multitude that wheels and propagates and returns to the nothingness whence it came? Who, flourishing and pleased with life, can look unblinkingly at death and not turn away from that momentous truth to any trivial distraction—lunch, a *New Yorker* cartoon, the neighbor's cat? "One can no more look steadily at death than at the sun," La Rochefoucauld remarked; and Freud, "Our own death is indeed unimaginable, and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it, we can perceive that we really survive as spectators." I do not, as a rule, care for Jung, but he knew the score:

> When an aging person secretly shudders and is even mortally afraid at the thought that his reasonable expectation of life now amounts to only so many years, then we are painfully reminded of certain feelings within our own breast; we look away and turn the conversation to some other topic. . . . Naturally we have on hand . . . one or two suitable banalities . . . such as "everyone must die sometime," . . . [b]ut when one is alone and it is night and so dark and still that one hears and sees nothing but the thoughts which add and subtract the years, and the long row of disagreeable facts which remorselessly indicate how far the hand of the clock has moved forward, and the slow, irresistible approach of the wall of darkness which will eventually engulf everything you love, possess, wish, strive, and hope for—then all our profundities about life slink off to some undiscoverable hiding place, and fear envelops the sleepless one like a smothering blanket.

I had more of Jung's experience as a boy than in my seventies. Then, I was often aware of walking on a cliff's edge and did not want to grow older. One night when our parents were out, I was terrified that they might not return. My older brother assured me that they would; but how did he know? We comfort each other like sheep huddled together in a flock, yet as Samuel Butler said brutally, "A sheep's *raison d'être* is to be fleeced as often as possible, and then to have its throat cut."

Our attitude toward death is wildly contradictory. The young men who die in wars by the hundreds of thousand are honored (much good it does them), buried in tidy cemeteries, and largely forgotten. "We'll never forget" is said at funeral services and commemorative ceremonies, but if life is to go on with a degree of satisfaction, what else can we do but forget or try to forget the dead? Historians and advocates of every cause insist that

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we remember: the Holocaust, the Gulag, World Wars I and II, Hiroshima, Vietnam, lynchings, AIDS, and cancer. Christians must remember the crucifixion; Jews, the temple in Jerusalem. Scholars, novelists, poets fight for our attention, but their task is impossible; each new memory displaces another; inevitably we forget, we must forget or transmute unwanted death into something it is not: a fulfillment, a time of peace and rest, a sleep, a meaningful place in the unfathomable graveyard of history.

The memory of what we have ourselves experienced is entrenched more firmly than anything we read, but a changing procession of events is entrenched in each person, group, and generation. Life is a more potent instructor than any book. Books cascade from the presses; librarians sort and save them until, cruel necessity, they are weeded or disintegrate. They do have a worthy purpose, however, as do museums, historic sites, monuments, art. Culture cushions us from the surrounding nothingness as padding cushions the coffined body. "[A] writer's books are a little like flowers," Mircea Eliade jotted in his diary. "We know very well that once cut and put in a vase they only survive for a few days. . . . Just like flowers, books . . . must above all appear, at the risk of subsequently falling into oblivion."

I have taken up a hobby I only half understand: buying a few rare and private-press books, *absolutely not a "collection."* Amassing their collections and housing them in splendid buildings, Mellon, Morgan, and Huntington knew that their objects would long outlast them. "Time which antiquates Antiquities, and hath an art to make dust of all things, hath yet spared these *minor* Monuments."

Scientists and scholars want knowledge, or so they say, but it is remarkable how they resist reality. I admire my wife's father, being unable to emulate him. Asked what he planned to do in retirement, he said, "I am going to sit on a rocking chair and rock." That suggests a calm I cannot attain.

Things are obviously closing down. What are the most important or most pleasant things to do? The choice is not as hard as it may seem, because wearied eyes and legs and the limited span of full alertness curtail the choices, which are more adventitious than planned. When the pleasant and the important can be distinguished, the pleasant usually takes precedence. Only what is vital now seems important, and precious little is vital: not revising my will; not sorting my books, letters, or photographs. My papers are a mess and will remain that way until, in the fullness of time, my wife discards them. My motto has become: "What need not be done today need never be done."

Visiting sick, likely dying, friends is vital. If they go on living, is it vital to see them more often than I otherwise would? So many of our friends are sick, damaged (a broken hip or wrist, eyes or ears that function poorly, like dated film), wounded (mourning a spouse), or frail. The

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minds of several have plainly slipped a cog or two. If we haven't seen one for a year, his appearance shocks until the familiar expression emerges from the pale wrinkles.

To put it as politely as I can, death is a damned nuisance. Friends we have known for fifty years or twenty, friends we start to make, wrap themselves up and die. My stock of acquaintances diminishes far more rapidly than I can replenish it. The obituaries are a daily insult. Undress in public or kill someone and you get prominent attention and a photograph; die and your life may be worth a few sentences. In most cases, your family has to pay for the privilege of announcing your death.

I don't want to punish you, suffering reader, or give you the wrong impression. For all their frustrations, the Lawrence projects were deeply satisfying, resolving (for me: publishers be damned!) questions I had nursed for sixty years. If only ambiguous answers could be given to certain of them, that, too, had implications for other intellectual fields. Social scientists like to force choices, but the truth cannot be forced, and if, like Mona Lisa's smile, it remains ambiguous, so be it.

In another mood (especially if the wretched Lawrence manuscript is accepted!), I might write more cheerfully: about the meetings I attend, the intellectual follies I encounter and commit, the motley things I read, starting twenty books and finishing four. I have six or ten going, very slowly, at a time. Some I no longer attempt: for example, the new translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* I bought in 1990, the five-volume Doves Bible, Frederick Karl's massive biography of Conrad, Melville's *Clarel.* Do I get credited for buying or debited for not reading them?

My work ethic continues, but I spend much time thinking how to employ it and fighting the thought that my choice matters little to me and not at all to anyone else.

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THE UNCERTAIN ART

Writing

SHERWIN B. NULAND

I have never given much thought to the craft of writing. But nowadays it is impossible to have one's name on a book or two without being deluged with questions from well-meaning people wanting to know how it is done. I wish I had an answer.

Other than its association with that word itself—*craft*—writing would seem to have little in common with surgery, the job that occupied my days and nights for almost four decades. Surgery is an exercise in precision, a tour de force of organized teamwork, and a tribute to the supremacy of planning and forethought. No matter the variations, unexpected findings, or even occasional mishaps that may be encountered in its performance, the essence of the undertaking is to bring every irregularity back into the preconceived arc of intent, so that the trajectory goes directly toward its necessary goal. The surgeon attempts to replicate a perfection that can be reached only by removing himself from the emotion of the moment. Writing, or at least writing as I do it, is impossible without an exhilarating sense of freedom that carries author and reader to unexpected places. For both, it is a solitary journey of discovery, unique each time it is made. Its very substance is emotion.

Yet I am not alone in my attraction to the polarity between writing and surgery. For those of us who practice both, the confining strictures of surgery are made acceptable and even comforting by the uncontrolled thinking through which we are carried aloft while writing. Writing lifts me up and wafts me around in that sublime detachment from the here and now, and even from the directed goal that stabilizes my mind while I am operating or facing a clinical decision at the bedside. And surgery provides a groundwork of structure and substantiality that connects me to the place from which I may safely fly while writing, knowing that its predictable refuge awaits me when I return. These are two different forms of excitement, between which I don't know if I have ever achieved a balance. But I have certainly had a lot of fun.

It is hardly false modesty to point out that I am not really a writer. I am a surgeon who has been at his calling for a very long time and carries a sensory load so deeply buried by layers of accumulated experiences that he barely knows that most of it exists. Even "barely" is excessive—at any moment all but small bits of it are hidden and seemingly inaccessible. In this, I come to the work of writing in much the same way as would a lawyer, a businessman, a teacher, or a diplomat; I come to the work in much the same way as would a butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker, or even a Bowery bum. Though life has shown each of us a different scene, we are alike in having analyzed what we've experienced again and again, always in the light of everything we have subsequently undertaken and undergone. And much of this harvesting of new meanings has taken place without our being aware of it.

Even the least introspective of us cannot escape a decades-long accumulation of impressions, gestalts, weltanschauungs, philosophies, and musings on the human condition. Although our recollection may be distorted as we view events through the lens of later times and later patterns of thinking, the passage of time adds to our ability to make sense of them, even if they have somewhat lost their shape in the vast caverns of a complex emotional life. Our impressions of the past are carried at a mostly unconscious level, as feelings, stored images of varying degrees of sharpness, un-

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structured ruminations, and other inchoate shapes. The past melds with the present and waits to be rediscovered and rethought.

Emotion is the closest thing to truth that the human mind possesses. When we attempt to articulate it to others, emotion leads to an unstructured thought, which leads to a structured thought, which leads to the language required to express it. Though some will disagree, I believe it is ultimately the transmission of emotion that is the root of the distinctive form of communication we call literature. If we let it, writing brings everything forward. But in order for this to happen, writing must be done in an atmosphere of unhampered spontaneity, of free association like that so valued by our psychoanalytic brethren.

When Aldous Huxley asserted that good writing is "free association, artistically controlled," he was not far from William Wordsworth's description of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity." To write—whether it takes the form of poetry or prose, fiction or nonfiction—is to let the words take form from the thought brought forth by feeling. Nathaniel Hawthorne took the process a bit further: "The greatest merit of style is, of course, to make the words absolutely disappear into the thought." But the feeling must come first.

The retrieving from those deep places can be done only by the uncensored mind allowing itself to feel the uncensored emotion. While letting this process flow, one must not think of style or even of content—what will out will out, and it must be followed wherever it leads. Style, too, will follow. This is as true of fiction, and even of the writing of history or opinion, as it is of poetry. Only in technical papers is it to be avoided, or so say the mahatmas of the professional journals—but I sometimes wonder whether here and there a place shouldn't be found for it.

And so, when asked how I write, I say that there is no real method but to have faith in my unconscious, a reply that almost always leaves questing interrogators unsatisfied. And I do trust my unconscious to find the way, and even to guide my writing toward thematic cohesion. It has been my invariable habit, whether composing an essay like this one or a full-length book, to pay no mind to the totality of its structure. I have never made an outline; I have never thought about the ending while writing the beginning; I have never planned chapter 4 while working on chapter 3; I have never considered what themes or lessons are to be drawn from the piece, preferring that they make themselves apparent to the reader (and to me) as the work unfolds. Truth be told, I have never planned so much as a sentence ahead. To me, writing is like being borne along on a Ouija board—it takes me where it will.

It may astonish some readers to be told that every piece I have ever written has somehow, willy-nilly, found its own beginning, middle, and end. My conscious mind has had no hand in this, ever. The writing has happened by itself. It seems always to find the shape, the message, and the symmetry that make it a whole. The unconscious may seem to meander, but it knows where it is going and precisely how to get there—I refer here not to *my* unconscious alone, but to everyone's—if people would only let it do what it wants. I suspect that far more writers follow its path than many readers realize. Percy Bysshe Shelley understood this better than most. He wrote, "The very mind which directs the hands in formation is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process."

And the unconscious does something else that a writer eventually gets used to, but not before it has flabbergasted him again and again with its incalculable power. It unearths information that he does not know he has. It brings back memories he would otherwise have no way of recalling. Names, facts, entire scenarios come forward as though they had been awaiting the summons to this moment, called up by the power of untrammeled free association. This process is not one that needs thinking about: it happens by itself, is brought forth by the very act of writing. One thought leads ineluctably to another and yet another, and before a page is completed a pattern has emerged that is beyond anything anticipated at the outset. Whatever intent the writer may have had when he began often has no relation to the final product. The Ouija board is a miraculous vehicle.

And what comes forth is not only information. As thought forms, it merges into opinion,

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and before he is through, the writer not infrequently finds that he has propounded a philosophy that he had no idea was forming in his mind. I have never written a book in which a coherent point of view that was either nebulous or quite unknown to me didn't appear on the page as though I'd been its champion for years. Reading a completed manuscript, I have been taken aback by worldviews I proposed of which I had no forethought, which I hardly remembered having recorded on the paper. They might have been written by someone else, except that they seem to give precise expression to my own convictions. I have been brought to tears by stories of my own childhood experiences told in a voice that I recognize as my own, and yet I cannot clearly recall having written them.

These are among the reasons that I always encourage people to try writing. What better way to find out about oneself, to bring back memories and the sweet pain of nostalgia, to give form to ideas previously uncertain, and to discover truths that would otherwise remain hidden? What better way to see that the events in which we have partaken are recognizable to those who read about them, even if in different form? What better way to come to the realization that the more one reveals his most intimate experiences and thoughts, the more he is expressing universal themes, understood by every reader? There is joy in this, and an indescribable sense of having brought meaning to the events of everyday life.

It might be thought that virtually all the foregoing refers to autobiography or memoir, but that wouldn't be correct. I believe the writer belongs on every page he writes, whether he is speaking directly about his experiences and his views or is present only as the voice through which information is conveyed. Unless one is making an overt effort to imitate another's patterns of composition—an uncomfortable thing to attempt, which completely inhibits the spontaneity of the unconscious—the very sound of his sentences is unique to the author. His style is formed by everything he has ever read, everything he has ever experienced, everything he has ever thought. It is uniquely his. It brings a distinctive quality to his work, and is perhaps the most important of the factors that make him different from any other writer. Wanting to be or not, he is there on the page.

Every essayist, of course, knows this. But so does every other thoughtful person who has ever put words on paper for anything but the driest of technical articles. Michel de Montaigne said it best, some four centuries ago: *"Je suis moi-même la matière de mon livre"* (I am myself the substance of my book). Every bit of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry has been produced by the only man or woman who could have written it. Each of its sentences should proclaim that fact.

But all of this pertains to *any* writing. My charge in this space is to write about medicine, so I will look at the special characteristics of medical writing. There is the factor of technical language, of course, and the ever-present danger that readers will see themselves in any clinical situation that might be described. Not much can be done about the latter, but the former is easily handled by one or both of two strategies. The etymology of words may be provided so their medical usage becomes clear, or the authors may avoid such terms entirely, eschewing the medical for plain English. Medical terminology is, after all, only a form of shorthand, and it is not always necessary.

This aspect of medical writing is shared by any literature that deals with complex matters—from philosophy to physics—in which an arcane language of experts has grown up. But there is a major concern that is unique to doctors writing about medicine: the need for confidentiality in the information they disclose about their patients.

The first and most obvious rule is never to use any person's actual name unless given permission to do so. If other circumstances can be disguised without prejudicing the verisimilitude of the narrative, this too must be done. But it is necessary to be extremely wary in such things. A medical case history by its very nature is a story in which the altering of a few apparently small details may have a significant effect on the judgments to be made or the lessons to be drawn. The finest distinctions of fact, or the most intimate characteristics of a patient and the course of his disease, may carry clues to the entire point of the story. Some of this material can be sufficiently unlovely that there

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might be hesitancy in disclosing it. But in clinical descriptions, there is no substitute for absolute truth, and often no substitute for the depiction of grim or grimy images.

And there's the rub. The absolute truth in all of its stark clinical reality may be perceived by the patient as a violation of confidentiality, even when names and places are changed. What is to be done about this, short of so modifying the story that it loses its meaning?

Another way to put this question is the form in which it was asked of me not long ago by a young physician-writer, a man deeply concerned with the ethical consequences of such narratives. Even when the patient has been rendered completely unrecognizable, is there a violation of trust if no permission is sought, or if the man or woman has died? Is there a violation of trust when permission has actually been granted, but the patient has no idea of the detailed scrutiny to which he and his disease will be subjected by the physician? Does the physician's need to tell a story that may have wide—even life-changing—implications for his readers justify such a breach of confidentiality? Is it, in fact, a breach of confidentiality at all? Further, since clinical descriptions routinely appear in standard medical journals, usually without permission, is there really a difference between such writings and those of a more literary nature? As my correspondent so trenchantly summarized the conundrum: "To whom does the story belong?"

Many will disagree with my response, but I submit it for reflection by all who would undertake such writings. What I propose here would seem to follow naturally from the methods by which I have suggested that truth may be found in all forms of literary work.

The act of writing is a process that enables us to recall things as they were experienced while they were happening—especially if they are long-ago events—in the light of later years. It permits us to articulate both how those events appear to our minds at the moment of recording and what lessons they may teach. Writing makes it possible to find out what we think, often for the first time. It is a process that will be totally honest if we are willing to feel those emotions that are coming forth from preserved memory and to put them down on paper uncensored. While this process is taking place, there can be no consideration of ethics, confidentiality, or even loyalty to participants. There is only the reality of what the writer feels to be the truth of what he is describing. In short, what I do is change the names and never consider the consequences that may result from my efforts to achieve the essential truth.

Others have written that all writers ultimately betray those who are their subjects. But they would betray themselves were it otherwise—and their readers too. Writing is not an exercise in discretion; it is an exercise in seeking the clues to our lives. In this sense, the story belongs to the storyteller, because the storyteller is the truth seeker. At the risk of appearing lofty, I believe that the storyteller is also the person communicating the truth to the world, perhaps to posterity. A distinguished medical historian, now long dead, once told me that doctors are the only real philosophers, because only doctors know how people actually behave. Perhaps that is an overstatement, but the practice of medicine has been my key to the reality of the human condition, and I use it as I must.

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JOURNAL

An Aborted Project

DORIS GRUMBACH

In 1978 I began piling up boxes of 5x7 cards (the ancient way of taking notes) on Willa Cather. Four years later I received a book contract. These journal entries begin with a visit to Cather's longtime publisher.

September 8, 1982. Pub. dir. Bill Loverd introduced me to elderly William Koshland, who worked with Alfred Knopf when Cather was about to become the star of the five-year-old company. Offices quite plush, but WK seems relegated to a small corner where (I guess) he is no longer the power he was. Told me that Alfred first met Cather at Yehudi Menuhin's 21st birthday party. (C. a friend and admirer of YM since his child-prodigy days.) She also admired his slim mother and her boyish haircut, thought Koshland. When Cather asked all her friends to return her letters to them so she could burn them (she did), Mrs. Menuhin was reluctant to send hers back. Thought she probably did not. Will be an uphill job to track down the few letters out there that were not destroyed.

Koshland said AAK and WC often went to concerts together. He would bring the score of the main work for her to follow. She always insisted on having a nap before a concert, thus making pre-concert dinner uncertain. Said she could not hear properly without first sleeping.

Koshland also remembered Cather bringing mss. of her books to the office and handing them over to AAK. She wrote the jacket copy of later books herself.

October 5, 1982. Traveled by train and then taxi to Alfred Knopf's house in Purchase, N.Y. He is somewhat feeble, uses a walker, but still looks like an old pirate: a small man with fire in his black eyes; large, drooping mustache; narrow, arresting face.

Great deal of Cather and publishing talk accompanied by excellent food and wine (ceremoniously decanted and then its age and anticipated taste described at length).

Took notes by hand. Tape recorder, awkward instrument, kept cutting off.

Asked about her version (published) of how she came to him to have her books published. Chagrined, he admitted there were two accounts, one he had himself promoted. First story: she came to his two-room office on 42nd St., saw the Chinese-blue cloth he had chosen to cover Arthur Waley's translations of poetry, complained that *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* had been bound by Houghton Mifflin in dull brown cloth she disliked. On the spot, he said, she gave AAK her book of short stories, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, to publish.

Second story: WC had seen a copy of a Joseph Hergesheimer novel out of which fell a leaflet advertising another forthcoming Knopf publication by another writer. Thinking AAK was a man who knew how to publicize books properly and dissatisfied with HM's sales of her books, she came to him.

To his delight, he said, Cather cared nothing for money or advances, only for notice, fame. Took no chances on reviews for her later books. Had AAK ask the editor of the *Times Book Review* if Dorothy Canfield Fisher could review a novel, she being a college friend of C's. Editor agreed, Dorothy Canfield Fisher did.

Yes, very often wrote her own ads and jacket copy. To prove this, AAK showed me the original copy for *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* in which C. described the theme as "moving and dramatic . . . and it is treated with the sensitive-

Doris Grumbach, a novelist, memoirist, and critic, is the author, most recently, of *The Presence of Absence* and *The Pleasure of Their Company*.

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ness and imagination of a master." She goes on: "Here again is the calm dignity of her beautiful style—matchless among those of writers of today. . . ." Well, now. Modesty and underestimation of her gifts not part of her character. Knopf gives me the original copy. Nice to have it in my file, typed with her purple ribbon and signed with her initials.

Demanded attention, not money. AAK met her at the pier on her returns from Europe to facilitate customs, her luggage, etc. Kept her supplied with cases of the best wine. Accompanied her to concerts. Yes, he brought the score. Yes, he went without dinner to permit her essential nap before listening to music.

No, she did not bring mss. to the office. Sent them to him directly "by transit." I said I had read his letters and telegrams to her after he received each new ms. Sounded as though he liked everything she ever wrote. Did he? "Yes, everything." "Every novel better than the last? Even *Sapphira* or *Lucy Gayheart?*" I asked. "If I wrote that, then it was so." Sounded irritated with me for asking.

As I was leaving, he quoted his favorite old Spanish proverb: "Books impede the persistence of stupidity."

December 2, 1982. Taos, New Mexico, to follow WC's account in *Death Comes for the Archbishop.* Christmas midnight mass at Ranchos de Taos, the church Georgia O'Keeffe immortalized. Cather's Bishop Latour says it has "gaudily decorated altars" (it has) and "agonized Christs and dolorous virgins and the very human figures of the saints."

Mass celebrated in English and Spanish by a young priest. Sitting next to me a very young Pueblo Indian man, tiny child in his lap. Before mass starts, goes to the crèche on the altar, holds his child up to show it the Christ-baby. Baby in crèche is a papoose. Thought Cather would have liked to see this. Even might have used it.

Handsome statue of Bishop Ramy (Latour) in front of cathedral in Santa Fe. Cather suggests great devotion between him and his friend Father Vaillant. Bishop is devastated by his departures. Wanted always to keep his friend with him. "No one could have guessed that a sharp struggle was going on within him" at Vaillant's request for other duties in Albuquerque. Lets him go.

Not the first time C. has explored love, or at least long friendship, between men: see the Russians, Peter and Pavel, in *My Ántonia,* and Godfrey St. Peter's yearning for Tom Outland in *The Professor's House.*

February 24, 1983. At our house in Washington, Allen Ginsberg demonstrates how to "sit" properly in order to meditate. Neither of us can manage the lotus position. We go to dinner at a Chinese restaurant on Connecticut Avenue, talk about Cather. AG admires her prose but thinks she was frightened by real emotions, especially same-sex ones. Asked him if one needed isolation to pray his way. Not at all. he says, stands up, places his hands in prayerful position, almost closes his eyes, and walks up and down the aisles in Yenching Palace, intoning OOOM. Unprepared, embarrassed, I stare down at my mushu pork.

June 16, 1983. Yaddo. Boxes of Cather notes, cards, ms., unpacked in the room that once was John Cheever's in the mansion. I arrive with terrible case of poison ivy, in no mood for serious work, covered with calamine lotion and self-pity. First night: a small brown bird comes in through open window and settles for hours on the plaster bust of Julius Caesar (I think). Unnerved by its motionless presence. Little sleep. It finally leaves about five in the morning. Believe it was Cheever reincarnated, come to investigate who is occupying his writing space, whether the usurper is worthy.

June 27, 1983. Days and nights of doubt, debate, and then decision to abandon Willa. Partly, I don't much like her after all this time. I've grown to know her less savory side. But mostly because I am suddenly, incomprehensibly struck with an idea for a novel and cannot avoid it. Came while I was sorting notes for 2nd chapter of WC: uninvited, unexpected, but very welcome. So.

June 28, 1983. Found this in an old notebook: "Man's inexplicable capacity to begin again." Who said this?

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The 2000 Phi Beta Kappa Book Awards

The Phi Beta Kappa Award in Science

CRADLE OF LIFE: THE DISCOVERY OF EARTH'S EARLIEST FOSSILS. *By J. William Schopf. Princeton University Press. $29.95.*

Citation: J. William Schopf's *Cradle of Life* introduces us to what we might call paleogeobiochemistry, a field that explores fossils in the rocks formed during the earliest part of the earth's history—from about 550 million years ago to 4500 million years ago. This pre-Cambrian span had been thought to be earth history; now we are beginning to see it as life-on-earth history. Schopf writes for the general reader about why the discovery of fossils is important for our conceptions of early earth time; how one goes about finding fossils; and what microscopic, biological, chemical, and geological procedures are used in working with them.

The Christian Gauss Award

UNEARTHING THE PAST: ARCHAEOLOGY AND AESTHETICS IN THE MAKING OF RENAISSANCE CULTURE. *By Leonard Barkan. Yale University Press. $40.*

Citation: *Unearthing the Past* is a work of prime significance and magisterial persuasion, the illumination of an entire Renaissance culture through an interpretation of the recovery of ancient artifacts. Leonard Barkan has developed his analyses with interdisciplinary reach and zestful authority, with frequent digressions that round on themselves to support his general argument. His balanced judgments persist from his initial exposition to his spirited conclusion. Throughout what is clearly a labor of love, Barkan tempers his wide erudition with irony and wit, so that he can wear all his weight of learning lightly like a flower.

The Ralph Waldo Emerson Award

THE HOLOCAUST IN AMERICAN LIFE. *By Peter Novick. Houghton Mifflin. $27.*

Citation: *The Holocaust in American Life* is a well-argued, well-documented examination of how a collective memory for a small minority can become a significant aspect of civic consciousness for a majority. It scrutinizes two interlocking historical questions: (1) how and why the Holocaust moved from the margins to the center of how American Jews understand themselves and represent themselves to others; and (2) why, as the author puts it, "fifty years after the fact and thousands of miles from its site . . . the Holocaust has become so large in our culture." Peter Novick has written a sober and sobering book of considerable political and ethical import, a stunning piece of scholarship in the newish field of history and memory.

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• B O O K S •

REREADING

The Worldly Stendhal

PHILLIP LOPATE

Stendhal first came into my life through the impassioned offices of Dr. Floyd Zulli. Improbable as it may sound to a younger generation, this professor with dark-rimmed glasses, a crew cut, and a zeal for world literature had mesmerized our household and thousands like it into getting up at 6:30 A.M. and turning on the television set to catch his lectures on the novel in a program called "Sunrise Semester." Many took the TV course for college credit, but my folks did it for old-fashioned enlightenment. When I think about my parents, lowly textile clerks with no more than high school diplomas, setting the alarm early to hear a lecture and trying to keep up with the reading, I could weep.

In any case, Floyd Zulli (what a name! the name of a Hungarian charlatan) kicked off his course with an interesting choice, Stendhal's *The Red and the Black.* In our Brooklyn ghetto, this writer was not a given, like Dostoyevsky or Kafka. I was immediately drawn to the mystical sound of *Stendhal,* an author with one name, like a magician (or a charlatan, likewise). Of course Zulli made it clear that his real moniker was Marie-Henri Beyle, but Beyle's invention of a new identity for himself appealed to me. I, slogging through the indignities of high school, had some self-invention in mind as well.

At college, though we read a few chapters of *Le Rouge et le noir* in French, I decided to defer the pleasure of finishing it on my own. Also, by this time I had picked up a snobbish prejudice that the very popularity of *The Red and the Black* made it a little common, whereas *The Charterhouse of Parma* seemed to exude the aroma of a delicacy: literary caviar. So I began my education in Stendhal with his last great novel, *The Charterhouse.* It was assigned for colloquium class, too, come to think of it; I had no choice in the matter.

Colloquium was a big deal at Columbia: you had to be interviewed to get in, and supposedly only the most brilliant students—highest grades, best academic minds—made the cut. In practice this meant I was thrown in with a bunch of dull premedical students seeking to become well-rounded and only a few humanities soul mates. To this disappointment was added my unspoken shame, because most of the other seniors were entering their second year in the seminar, whereas I had been rejected the year before for junior colloquium. It didn't help that in that first interview I'd dismissed Jean Giraudoux as a lightweight, only to discover while idly going through the Butler Library card catalogue that one of my interviewers had done his doctoral dissertation on Giraudoux! In those days I was forever provoking Columbia with my working-class defensiveness, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. An intentional provocation, surely, occurred in the first semester of senior colloquium, when, instead of doing an analytical paper on *Rameau's Nephew,* I wrote a scampish Diderotian dialogue about the colloquium itself, sending up everyone in class, including the two professors, F. W. Dupee, a lion of the English department,

Phillip Lopate's books include three collections of personal essays: *Bachelorhood, Against Joie de Vivre,* and *Portrait of My Body.*

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and Richard Kuhns, a younger, tweedier man from Philosophy, who co-taught the class. They were not amused and demanded a substitute paper, which I never handed in. (Dupee forgave me, apparently. He was a dear man, a peach, sympathetic to rebellion, and a fine critic with a subtle prose style: how I could have twitted him so cruelly I'll never know.) My next paper would be on *The Charterhouse of Parma,* and this time I resolved to play by the rules.

The Charterhouse of Parma has been characterized by Richard Howard as "a miracle of gusto, brio, élan, verve, panache." I took to the book immediately and avidly, and it remains a rarefied pleasure. Why this rather recherché novel should have so delighted me at age twenty needs some background. I'd already been submitting the shape of my future sensibility to a gang of writers who specialized in analysis and paradox. I was powerfully drawn to Nietzsche (who loved Stendhal, saying: "The man was a human question-mark. . . . Objection, evasion, joyous distrust, and love of irony are signs of health"); Gide (who declared *The Charterhouse of Parma* his favorite French novel); and Dostoyevsky (my idol)—they had prepared me, with their psychological lineage. Also, I loved the comic novel: Fielding's cheeky addresses, Sterne's digressions, Diderot's sabotage of normal plot flow, Svevo's rationalizing narrator, Machado de Assis's sardonic, pithy style. What tickled me most, I think, was voice—the sound of outrageous candor cutting to the point, combined with a touch of irony insinuating that it could never be that simple.

In Stendhal, I found the exemplar of a spasmodic, abrupt voice whose very impatience signaled vitality. Where another writer might take paragraphs to prepare an insight, Stendhal would polish the business off with a terse epigram ("Courtiers, who have nothing to examine in their souls, notice everything"). His mind was so generously well stocked, he could throw away ideas the way Bob Hope did one-liners. His paragraphs lacked topic sentences; or rather, they were all topic sentence, one atop the other. He dispensed with transitional sentences whenever it suited him, and, by doing so, "predicted" in prose the Godardian jump cut I loved. "Let us skip ten years of progress and happiness" was his typically brazen shortcut. To leave out plodding intermediate steps, you need sophistication about the deep structure of narrative, supreme confidence in yourself, and an unimaginable faith in the audience's intelligence.

Stendhal wrote like a free man. Unconstrained by popular opinion, he wrote "to the happy few" (the oft-quoted final words of *Charterhouse*) and for an audience a hundred years hence who would appreciate him. I was that audience, I liked to think.

I was especially smitten with the early battle episodes, wherein Fabrizio, our Italian hero, voluntarily enlists in the French army. Barely seventeen years old, he runs away from home with a head full of romantic notions and an allegiance to his idol, Napoleon. As he scoots from one place to another, following dubious escorts, dodging bullets, having his horse stolen, trying to discover whether he has actually taken part in a battle, and encountering a pusillanimous army in full retreat (this is Waterloo, remember), Stendhal observes with comic regularity that Fabrizio does not understand in the least what is happening. Ah, to understand what is happening to you—the pattern underneath ephemeral events!

If I had to summarize in one word what I cherished about *The Charterhouse of Parma* and Stendhal, that word would be *worldliness.* There was a mystique about worldliness that attracted me at twenty. Not for me the adolescent pulings of *Catcher in the Rye:* if the price of entering adulthood was loss of innocence and the residues of childlike wonderment, I could not pay up quickly enough. Disenchantment was my goal. So when the worldly diplomat Count Mosca advises his adored Gina to marry an elderly man who can give her wealth in return for her title, we may be shocked at this nobleman pimping his beloved, but then we appreciate his grasp of circumstances. In the same practical manner, Mosca advises Fabrizio to enter the priesthood with an eye to making bishop: a strange choice for a libidinous young man, requiring years of patient execution, but one that makes sense in the *rouge et noir* context of nineteenth-century ambition. He also advises Fabrizio to take a mistress from a conservative family and to read in public only the

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stupidest right-wing newspapers. We are none of us romantic isolates; we are social animals, being watched by potential allies and enemies. Mosca is a realist: it does not bother him that he had been cuckolded by his wife, but it does bother him that she had embarrassed him by doing it with a political enemy.

To be worldly means to know that men and women are not angels, that they have vanities and vices that they seek to justify. Choderlos de Laclos, author of *Les Liaisons dangereuses,* one of my favorite novels at the time (and still), certainly went further in depicting depravity as the common rule. The strategies that Valmont and Mme de Merteuil suggest for each other in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* invoke sex as a game of chess to ward off boredom. Stendhal was more interested in demonstrating the realpolitik of court life; but in both cases it was reason, aligned with the recognition of appetite, that intrigued me. I found the same combination in the Marquis de Sade. Youth, being largely powerless, is often fascinated with evil forces; I exemplified this. But the Gothic never appealed to me, because, as much as wanting evidence of evil, I was listening for, craving, reasoned analysis—the sound of calm French logic—even when it took a hypertrophied form, as in Sade.

The Charterhouse of Parma and *Les Liaisons dangereuses* swept through our family; they were read and discussed by me, my older brother Lenny, and my sister Betty Ann, who was a year younger than I (our youngest sister, Joan, was still playing with dolls). Betty Ann in particular—dark, attractive, moody—was drawn to portraits of strong, independent-minded, active women: in adolescence, she modeled herself on the Duchess Sanseverina, Mme de Merteuil, and Billie Holiday. For Lenny and me, the Duchess (Gina) was a fantasy ideal, an older woman of worldliness, beauty, and intelligence who we dreamed would take us under her wing. I found myself identifying (as did, I suspect, Stendhal) with Count Mosca, whose impressive overview of life could not win him first place in the heart of his beloved Gina. She was much more taken with her nephew, that gilded youth, that heedless naïf, Fabrizio. Wherever he went, women fell over themselves to please him. And even older men, like the Bishop, were fond of him. Placing himself forever in danger, he was continually being rescued by the interventions of guardian angels, most notably his adoring aunt.

I did not begrudge Fabrizio his trimphs; but, though we were both the same age, twenty, in no way did I identify with him. I was already seeing myself as the witty secondary, the one who would not get the girl, just as a few months later, when I read *Sentimental Education* for colloquium, I immediately identified not with the dreamy, aristocratic Frédéric but with his resentful lower-middle-class pal, Deslauriers. (Possibly, I think, so did Flaubert. I wonder if this is a professional deformation: the writer, stuck at his desk, avenges himself against his dreamboat protagonist by condescending to or otherwise undercutting him.)

At Columbia, I had watched with fascination two of my classmates, Mitch and Jon, who seemed to me golden boys. I had befriended both. You might even say, in retrospect, that I'd had crushes on them, though I would have denied it. It seemed they were always plunging into complicated situations—being torn between several girls vying for their attention, between several spiritual or aesthetic paths—and then coming to me for advice. I simultaneously envied their success with women and felt superior, from my perch of ironic detachment. But why should I have been certain so early that I could not be a ladies' man? Cowardice, probably. I don't think being a ladies' man is ever entirely a matter of looks but, rather, of a certain receptivity to adventure, and with it, an incompleteness of self. A man with those qualities is often more enticing to women than a man who projects himself as a "finished portrait" (as I was already attempting to do). Gina cannot love Count Mosca with all her heart because he is too cautious and aware of every consequence, while Fabrizio has the reckless, impetuous disregard of a sleepwalker, which she identifies with capacity for passion (rightly, it turns out, though his passion will be for Clélia, not for her).

I could never re-create my precise responses to Fabrizio or the novel after all these years were it not for the fact that I happened to keep my colloquium paper. Here it sits before me, typewritten on onionskin, with Professor Dupee's penciled comments—a shipwrecked sailor rescued from the ark of time. "Fabrizio,

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the Unconscious Hero." At the risk of being laughed at for exposing my undergraduate prose, I will quote:

> The unconscious hero was a favorite character of novelists in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. . . . The unconscious hero's ejection from the secure surroundings of his childhood into the larger world, his naïve attitudes confronted with obvious examples of evil, his near-passive participation in a string of marvelous incidents which thrust him into the path of danger and grotesque characters, and finally, his arrival at a stable position—was a formula employed in works as diverse as *Candide, Roderick Random, Tom Jones, Gulliver's Travels, Justine,* and *The Charterhouse of Parma.*
>
> The lack of great consciousness in a novel's protagonist seems to increase his susceptibility to coincidence. The rational, active, tragic hero in literature constructs his own destiny, and if he is defeated by fate the implication remains that he himself laid the groundwork for his failure. The unconscious hero, however, becomes much more controlled by the laws of chance.
>
> He is incredibly handsome, so much so that most people are immediately won over to him by his physical appearance; he is graceful, strong, courageous, and sufficiently proud of his honor to fight against personal attacks; he is naïve, gallant and susceptible to romantic notions; he is frequently passive. A character with these attributes is quite useful to the writer of an epic adventure novel, because the writer must be able to create a perpetual stream of incidents and plot twists. If the hero is handsome, then at any moment a woman may fall passionately in love with him, arouse her lover's jealousy and incite a duel . . .

In retrospect, it seems to me I was taking mocking revenge against my popular, handsome friends. Though Mitch and Jon were both highly intelligent, my consolation was the prejudice that they were unconscious Fabrizios and I was the ever-alert Count Mosca. My dream was to become Stendhal, never his romantic hero.

The rest of the paper analyzed the many ways Stendhal explained Fabrizio's unconsciousness. For instance, the anticlerical author blamed Catholicism, "the instruction given him by the Jesuits of Milan. That religion *deprives one of the courage to think of unfamiliar things,* and especially forbids *personal examination,* as the most enormous of sins; it is a step towards Protestantism." Or youth: "He was too young still; in his moments of leisure, his mind devoted itself with rapture to enjoying the sensations produced by the romantic circumstances with which his imagination was always ready to supply him. He was far from employing his time in studying with patience the actual details of things in order to discover their causes."

I cited Fabrizio's unconscious cruelty toward his aunt, after she had rescued him from prison, and went on to indict him: "His passion for Clélia ultimately leads to the death of his lover, their child, the Duchess and Fabrizio himself. Yet none of this tragedy would have occurred had Clélia and Fabrizio taken a rational course of action." (This is definitely a twenty-year-old talking!)

In the end, however, I gave Fabrizio his due by saying: "But if Fabrizio is led into situations of danger and eventual tragedy by his instincts, he is also elevated above the common run of men. It is Fabrizio's reckless heroism which wins him the adoration of Gina; yet this heroism, as with everything else about him, is of a peculiarly unconscious nature." And to prove it, I ended by quoting Gina: "I love in him his courage, so simple and so perfect that, one might say, he is not aware of it himself."

In the next twenty years, I stockpiled Stendhal's books. Often, going on vacation, when I wanted something I knew would amuse me, I would pluck a title of his from the shelf. *The Red and the Black* proved to be one of those special novels, like *Vanity Fair,* whose vivacity and charm far exceed what you might expect from a classic. I think it's Stendhal's best. I read his lesser novels, such as the refined *Armance,* the slight *Lamiel,* and the interminable *Lucien Leuwen,* which is interesting on every page but never comes to any point (it was left unfinished, perhaps because Stendhal realized he was spinning his wheels). I also read his Italian tales, such as "Vanina Vanini," which have the economy of Kleist, if not the same payoff. The tales did not stay with me;

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but the storyteller remained good company throughout.

In the meantime, Bertolucci's *Before the Revolution* had made a great stir: it was daring, youthful, formally inventive, yet attached to the traditions of an older culture, including Stendhal. The aura around *The Charterhouse of Parma* only deepened with Bertolucci's film, which plays off that novel in subtle ways, being set in Parma and featuring a beautiful aunt who is romantically obsessed with her nephew.

Finally, I turned to Stendhal's "creative nonfiction," and was enchanted again. *On Love,* his book-length meditation, seemed an astonishing font of philosophy, reverie, and paradox: it made me want to write essays. For the moment, it excited me enough that I imitated the master with a chapter called "Journal of Decrystallization" in my first novel, *Confessions of Summer.* Later, when I had gravitated definitively to the personal essay, I gobbled up his two autobiographical texts, *The Life of Henry Brulard* and *Memoirs of an Egotist.* The "I" in these books is one of his greatest characters: mischievous, Oedipal, pedantic, irascible, enthusiastic. I also read his *Roman Journal.* By this time, Stendhal had become for me one of those writers, like Montaigne or Borges, whose sentences are incurably interesting, regardless of whether the piece they are embedded in comes together.

Then I returned to where I started, and reread, several weeks ago, *The Charterhouse of Parma.*

I am fifty-seven years old; in a few years I will be sixty! This fact, which shakes me to the core, cannot help inspiring indifference in you, the reader. I completely understand your refusal to be moved by my aging. I even applaud it. And in part I feel it myself: Who cares? But I ask myself, What has all this aging accomplished? It has lost me the ability to appreciate a literary masterpiece.

I can no longer read Kerouac for pleasure; Dostoyevsky repels me. The Stendhal of the ruminations on love, travel, and himself continues to act as a replenishment, but I find *The Charterhouse* tiresome. Not all of it, of course. I still love the battle scenes, and the great interior monologues of Count Mosca and Fabrizio in chapter seven, and Gina flinging herself into her nephew's arms. I still love much of the analytical psychology. But as a whole, it feels a little too willed, precious, artificial. That so much of the narrative exists in summary—which I once regarded as audacious—now seems vitiating. *The Charterhouse of Parma* was dashed off by Stendhal in fifty-two days, at the end of 1838; and the circumstances of its composition (or should I say performance?) show: in its penchant for summary, in its likeness to a single whoosh of sustained exhalation, in its tour-de-force bravura quality, but also in its repetitions and hasty summing-up.

Stendhal's recurrent potshots, such as using the warmheartedness of his Italian characters to reproach French calculation, wear on my nerves. Count Mosca's long Machiavellian disquisitions on the inner workings of the court are no longer as fascinating this time around. It could be that worldliness itself, the initial attraction of *The Charterhouse,* no longer possesses the same allure, the same meaning for me. I have it—or as much as I am going to have.

The book also feels like an uneasy commingling of two traditions: the French psychological novel and the Italian tale, with farcical elements of opera libretto and *commedia dell'arte.* In my youth I had accepted the mixture of genres as an enrichment; this time I balked, partly because I was less able or willing to submit to the story as a waking dream. Over the years I seem to have lost some of my youthful capacity to enter the mimetic/oneiric space of a novel; and this coincides with my becoming more drawn to essays, history, memoir. Call it mental hardening of the arteries.

I also now mistrust Stendhal's brief for romantic love. His skepticism is more credible to me than his romanticism. *The Charterhouse* plays as a conflict between reason and passion. Stendhal admired passion but, I think, didn't really believe in it. He needed it, though, to advance the plot, so that he wouldn't get bogged down again, as happened with *Lucien Leuwen,* in observation, without an engine (passion) to drive it. The same Stendhal who wrote *The Life of Rossini* turned to operatic passion as a convention. In *Charterhouse,* this inflatedly noble tale, he sought to reproach a commercial age. But he was on firmer ground with the scheming middle-class upstart Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black* than with the aristocratic hunk Fabrizio.

The brio, the élan, the *sprezzatura* of *The*

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Charterhouse of Parma are an attempt to illustrate novelistically the charms of aristocracy. Now, Stendhal was not an aristocrat; though a man of the world, he had to be bluffing his posture here somewhat. I'm ashamed to say (it sounds so unworldly) that part of what put me off the novel this time was its class snobbery. We are told early on, doubtless with a trace of irony, that Fabrizio believed his high birth entitled him to a greater share of happiness than other men were entitled to. But Stendhal at times seems to swallow the notion of a high-born person's moral or aesthetic superiority. When Fabrizio kills a jealous actor, Giletti, who comes at him with a sword, all the enlightened characters treat this act as inconsequential, because the actor was riffraff. Stendhal's narrator himself says: "Actually the murder of Giletti was a trifle, and only political intrigue had managed to turn it into a matter of any importance." All right, so Stendhal was not a democrat, even if he was a liberal. But can he really have felt that murdering a human being meant nothing? Or was this his way of satirizing the solemnity of moralists? Either way, the absence of further clarification leaves me uncomfortable.

Later, when Fabrizio is being booked for this crime, we have the following exoneration by bloodlines: "During this brief exchange, Fabrizio stood patiently amid these police, showing the noblest expression [which] contrasted charmingly with the coarse appearance of the policemen around him." It would be one thing if Fabrizio were such a charming character that the reader himself felt inclined to forgive him; but here we come to my central complaint. Fabrizio is a bore, a cipher, unfit to hold the focus of such a complex novel. His raptures by the lake, his mooning over Clélia in prison, all of these passages dragged for me.

How could I not have seen this when I was younger?

I went back and read my college paper. What impressed me was my earlier patience with Fabrizio. For all my underlying malice against this lucky pup, the younger me still accorded him the respect of a legitimate leading man. I was curious, rather than irritated, about why Stendhal should choose him as his narrative vessel, and I went to the trouble of developing a literary thesis around it. What had happened to me over the years, that I'd gotten so much dumber? Was it that, with aging and balding, I no longer had even minimal patience for stories of privileged youths? Or had experience taught me that we were all golden boys and girls at moments; and thus the archetype had lost its morose fascination?

I was particularly taken with Fred Dupee's penciled comments on the first page: "Thorough and well reasoned essay—on a fruitful topic. I only think that you might distinguish more between F's 'unconsciousness' and the consequences of it for his temperament; his being able to 'live happily in the moment,' as Stendhal says. Isn't it this last that makes him great, rather than unconsciousness itself?" Living happily in the moment has proved not to be my forte. I think, even at twenty, I suspected it would not be, and was already mounting defenses against the lack. Professor Dupee was pointing to this blind spot. Dupee himself was, I think it safe to say, bisexual in his longings, if not his practice. He had, in fact, a crush on my friend Jon, which the latter told me about. It may be that the homoerotically inclined retain more of a lifelong enchantment with the youthful Adonis figure, which would enable them to appreciate better the comedy of that superior older person, Gina, fainting in anguish at the indifference of Fabrizio. It may be that great artists, be they Mozart or Stendhal or Shakespeare, always possess something of the hermaphrodite in their character. I am just speculating here. In any case, Stendhal believed in Italy, *dolce far niente*, happiness, in a way I no longer could. To that extent, the novel could no longer work for me.

Nevertheless, because I knew I was wrong, I went back and read parts of it a third time. With pleasure. Taken a little at a time, like a poison or a homeopathic medicine, *The Charterhouse of Parma* remains delicious.

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Paradox on the Grand Scale

ADAM KIRSCH

THE COMPLETE LETTERS OF OSCAR WILDE
Edited by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis.
Henry Holt. $45.

On May 25, 1895, Oscar Wilde was sentenced to two years in prison for acts of gross indecency—for homosexuality. Ever since then, the temptation to turn his spectacular life into what he disdained as "a story with a moral" has been irresistible; only the nature of the moral has changed in the hundred years since his death. Today, we see in Wilde's ruin the premier exhibit of Victorian prudery and hypocrisy. At the time, however, even most of Wilde's friends saw his fall as inevitable punishment, the revenge of common decency on one who scorned being decent and couldn't abide being common. Wilde himself predicted, with resigned despair, the lesson that history would draw from his case. In "De Profundis," the long, perplexing, self-dramatizing letter he wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas from Reading Gaol, he prophesied: "such [is] the irony of things that your father [will] live to be the hero of a Sunday-school tract; that you [will] rank with the Infant Samuel; and that my place [will] be between Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade. I dare say it is best so."

Douglas's father, of course, was the marquis of Queensberry, a nobleman known long before the Wilde affair for his erratic violence. Douglas, nicknamed Bosie, was Wilde's cruel fair, the lovely young man whose atrocious behavior never drove Wilde away for long. Queensberry, scenting a scandal that would bring him fresh notoriety, had left a card at Wilde's club for "Oscar Wilde, posing Somdomite" [*sic*]; Wilde, urged on by the parricidal Douglas, had brought suit for libel. It was a fatally foolish decision, since as Wilde and Douglas both knew, the charge was entirely true; Wilde was homosexual and had visited many male prostitutes, or "renters," some of whom were dredged up for the ensuing trial. After only two days, his case against Queensberry collapsed and he was himself arrested; it took two juries less than a month to convict him and give him the maximum sentence.

This fate haunts *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde,* the new and likely definitive edition of his correspondence, whose publication coincided with the centenary of Wilde's death in November 1900. We read its first half knowing that his dearest friends will prove false, his fame fleeting; the second half, covering the period from 1896 to his death, is like a raw nerve exposed, as a disgraced and exiled Wilde makes ever-more-frantic appeals for money. Even the brief hope he expresses, just after his release from prison, that he will write another hit play evaporates quickly. "I don't think I shall ever really write again," he tells Robert Ross in August 1898. "Something is killed in me. I feel no desire to write. I am unconscious of power." To Carlos Blacker he writes, "When you come and see me, you will see the ruin and wreck of what once was wonderful and brilliant, and terribly improbable."

Wilde's letters possess neither the genius that, he told André Gide, he put into his life, nor the talent he put into his works. They are written for the hour and the day, not for posterity; and for precisely that reason, they give a powerful and immediate impression of his actual life, if not of his whole mind. *The Complete Letters,* a work of devoted scholarship by the late Rupert Hart-Davis and Merlin Holland, Wilde's grandson, collects everything from dashed-off notes and telegrams to longer letters about fi-

Adam Kirsch is a poet and critic in New York City. His essay "Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot" appeared in the SCHOLAR's Summer 1998 issue.

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nances and productions of plays. The forty-one years to 1895 take up about as many pages as the five years after, for the simple reason that Wilde, in his palmy days, was almost always at the center of things; his social medium was not pen and paper but conversation. In the years after his ruin, when Wilde stole like a ghost from Dieppe to Naples to Paris, letters were his only contact with the wider world, and he wrote them frantically, but to only a few people: mainly to Robert Ross, Reginald Turner, and More Adey, his remaining intimates, and to Leonard Smithers, a disreputable but kind-hearted publisher who agreed to take on "The Ballad of Reading Gaol."

Given the tragic graph of his life—nearly two decades of ascending fame, then a sudden and total drop into utter disgrace—it is hard to avoid making Wilde into the hero or villain of a "story with a moral." But in his case, even more than most, that is a dangerous thing to do, for it banishes the real complexity of his mind and work. Like Byron before him and Sylvia Plath generations later, Oscar Wilde is a literary artist who was transmuted by scandal and tragedy into something more or less than an artist: a celebrity. Even in his lifetime, he was famous for being famous, before he had written anything of enduring value. But while he gloried in his notoriety, it would be the supreme insult to reduce Wilde to his life—Wilde, who proclaimed that "Life . . . is the solvent that breaks up Art, the enemy that lays waste her house."

His place in literary history remains ambiguous. The bulk of his work was produced in a very short time—from 1889, when he published his first essays, to 1895, when *The Importance of Being Earnest* took the stage in London. He was well known for at least ten years before this fertile period, as a brilliant undergraduate, a poet of the school of Swinburne, a connoisseur of art and design, a successful lecturer in America and England. Afterward, ironically, he was even more famous in his infamy. But the Wilde that remains was created in these six years, out of the fiction, essays, plays, and fairy tales.

To coax a single mind out of these diverse productions is difficult, perhaps even more so today, when the personality and the brilliant conversationalist are all but lost. For Wilde's mind had two strong, contradictory movements. First, and better known, is the Wilde who set Art in triumphant opposition to Life and held aesthetic impressions to be the supreme goal and fruit of existence. In 1889, he set forth his artistic ideal of sterility, remoteness, perfection: "The only beautiful things . . . are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies . . . it is outside the proper sphere of art."

At times he carries this provocative paradox remarkably far, almost into a true antinomianism, a transvaluing of all values. There are moments, in the essay "The Decay of Lying" for example, when Wilde seems to trespass, perhaps unwittingly, on Nietzschean territory: "Life holds the mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has been dreamed of in fiction. Scientifically speaking, the basis of life—the energy of life, as Aristotle would call it—is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which the expression can be attained. Life seizes on them and uses them, even if they be to her own hurt."

The insight that Art is not an ornament to Life, but is at times an ordeal—that Life is primarily energy, and demands new expressions in Art, even painful ones—is potentially far more radical than anything Wilde made of it. If he had been more in earnest, one is tempted to say, he might have taken it two steps further, and come up with something like "The Genealogy of Morals": "This secret self-ravishment, this artist's cruelty, this delight in imposing a form upon oneself as a hard, recalcitrant, suffering material and in burning a will, a critique, a contradiction, a contempt, a No into it, this uncanny, dreadfully joyous labor of a soul voluntarily at odds with itself . . . [is] the womb of all ideal and imaginative phenomena . . . and perhaps beauty itself."

But was Wilde ever so much in earnest? Earnestness is central to his thought—the whole of *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be seen as a long pun on the word and a satirical treatment of it—and it has, for him, a double meaning. For Wilde's immoralism was a perverse and tenuous outgrowth of a genuinely Victorian moralism. The second, and more

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fundamental, movement of his thought was a sincere belief in the civilizing mission of art, a belief that he shares with John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold. (Indeed, when Wilde's first book of poems was published in 1881, he sent it to Arnold with an unexpectedly reverent letter praising "the constant source of joy and wonder that your beautiful work was to all of us at Oxford.")

The stage, in particular, brought out this strain in Wilde's thought. *Lady Windermere's Fan, A Woman of No Importance,* and *An Ideal Husband* all propose Christian pity and forgiveness as the highest virtues. Mrs. Erlynne, the disgraced adventuress, redeems herself by taking the blame for Lady Windermere's transgression; Gerald Arbuthnot rejects the corrupt wordliness of Lord Illingworth; Lady Chiltern learns to love her husband for his weakness as well as for his strength. It is no wonder that these plays enjoyed tremendous success; they do not affront or perplex the audience but affirm its sentimental morality.

Even *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* that high-water mark of English decadence, is at bottom a moral tale, a fable of guilt punished. In "The Critic as Artist," Wilde was bold enough to write: "It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realize our perfection; through Art, and through Art only, that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence." But Dorian Gray, who puts this theory into practice, who surrounds himself with beautiful things and remains eternally beautiful himself, is brought low through his indifference to "actual existence." "It was his beauty that had ruined him. . . . His beauty had been to him but a mask." (This from the pen that lauded "The Truth of Masks"!) No wonder that, when the *Daily Chronicle* opined that Dorian Gray was "a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction," Wilde replied, in a letter to the editor: "The real trouble I experienced in writing the story was that of keeping the extremely obvious moral subordinate to the artistic and dramatic effect."

The crisis for Wilde's thought was the crisis of his life, his trial and imprisonment. Few writers could have emerged from Reading Gaol with their gifts intact. The conditions Wilde faced there were certainly barbaric: subjected to solitary confinement for twenty-three hours a day, given inadequate food and poor medical care, and allowed only one half-hour visit every three months, he was broken physically and mentally, dying three years after his release. But Wilde was particularly ill equipped, as an artist, to face adversity, especially public humiliation, because his art always had a large element of showmanship. The paradox is a showman's genre, concerned less with truth than with effect, and Wilde's finest, most intellectual works are paradoxes on the grand scale: they play the game of *épater la bourgeoisie* by insisting that art is more important than life, or that it even determines life. (Hamlet claims that art "holds the mirror up to Nature," Wilde says, only "to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters.")

Wilde's aestheticism was a brittle substance. The spring of his mind had too little inner tension, relying on the counterpressure of the world's fascinated disapproval; it shattered under the weight of real trouble, which it had never before known. Admirably, Wilde refused to bow down to the puritanism of his accusers and became, after his conviction, even more frank about his homosexuality. When an acquaintance wrote, in 1898, that she would not shun him now that he had "given up his insane and unnatural penchants," he reproved her with simple dignity: "When you allude to my life being in some respects 'unnatural and insane' you are judging of the life of another by an alien standard. . . . Charity is not a sentimental emotion; it is the only method by which the soul can attain to any knowledge—to any wisdom."

But as that last phrase reveals, Wilde did finally try to take refuge in the religious morality he once seemed to disdain. Earlier, he had rejected any kind of pity or compassion in art: "Charles Dickens was depressing . . . when he tried to arouse our sympathy for the victims of the poor-law administration. . . . We have mistaken the common livery of the age for the vesture of the Muses." Now an art of cold perfection seemed inadequate, and he wrote in "De Profundis": "My only mistake was that I confined myself so exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sungilt side of the garden,

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and shunned the other side for its shadow, its gloom. Failure, disgrace, poverty, sorrow, despair, suffering, tears even . . . all these were the things of which I was afraid." His new ideal poet was Christ, the Man of Sorrows. His last work, the poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," was in part a direct propaganda effort for prison reform.

Humanly speaking, of course, such an intellectual change is blameless; even the strongest man, when he becomes meek, is likely to revise his views about who will inherit the earth. But it casts a backward shadow on Wilde's work and reveals its precarious compromise between aesthetic ism and morality. A more insightful or a humbler writer would have seen, far earlier than Wilde did, the necessity for a more humane view of art—would not have remained content with impressive paradoxes. On the other hand, a stronger or more defiant mind might have insisted on its paradoxes even when they became painful. For Oscar Wilde, however, life was never serious enough—until, suddenly, it became much too serious.

Museum of Nations

HIGHLANDERS: A JOURNEY TO THE CAUCASUS IN QUEST OF MEMORY
By Yo'av Karny. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $27.

Reviewed by
JENNIFER SCHUESSLER

If Russia is, as Churchill famously remarked, "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma," then the Caucasus—the four-hundred-mile-wide mountainous strip of land between the Black and the Caspian Seas—is a puzzle within a conundrum within the riddle. The region has more national borders per square mile than any other on earth, and inside each small nation are a dozen or so tiny ones struggling to get out. Azeris, Circassians, Narts, Lezgins, Shapsugs, and Laks

Jennifer Schuessler is on the staff of the *New York Review of Books.*

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456 pages, $39.95

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live here, in places like Lezgistan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and the Talysh-Mugan Autonomous Republic, whether or not such places are on the map. Daghestan, the impoverished but stable neighbor to war-torn Chechnya, itself contains, in an area half the size of Kentucky, some thirty-two national groups. Among them is Khynalug, a one-village nation perched roughly seven thousand feet above sea level, where the archaic language, spoken nowhere else, requires fifty-nine consonants and eighteen vowels. The Caucasus, it would seem, is a paradise for stamp collectors, demagogues, and journalists.

Highlanders, the Israeli journalist Yo'av Karny's fascinating, richly researched book on this contentious region, is an ode wrapped in a plea draped with the faintest of hopes. It's an ode to the fierce fighting spirit of the mountaineers, which, "ill-defined" as Karny admits it is, "may account for astounding perseverance, explain a dogged sense of pride, and excuse irrational pursuits of liberty." It's a plea for Caucasians to exercise restraint in such pursuits and for outsiders to pay sympathetic if skeptical attention to the stories of suffering and survival these nations have to tell. And Karny's hope? That the quarreling tribes of the Caucasus can put aside mutual grievances and learn to coexist peacefully—perhaps becoming something like a southern, Muslim version of Switzerland, another agglomeration of ancient highlanders, whose freedom and prosperity spring from a political framework based on "their domicile, the mountains, irrespective of language or religious denomination."

Like commentators who dispute the hoary notion that implacable "ancient hatreds" are to blame for the Balkan wars, Karny emphasizes that the fallout from great-power geopolitics is as responsible as are ongoing blood feuds for much of the conflict in the Caucasus. Caught since medieval times between the Russians and the Turks, the highlanders were eccentric Muslims who sought to remain free of domination by either. Russia, however, was the more aggressive suitor, and from 1830 to 1859, a cleric named Imam Shamil unified all the Caucasians in a "holy war" against the czar's legions. Shamil was defeated, but his vision of a Pan-Caucasian nation survived. At the end of World War I, a united Mountainous Republic was briefly established in the region, which even sent a delegate to Versailles. The Bolsheviks denounced the old Russian empire as "a prison of nations," and set up fourteen non-Russian ethnic republics, where the larger groups would have nominal autonomy even as they were Russified and Sovietized. A successor to the Mountainous Republic reemerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, only to be plowed under by the forces of late-twentieth-century nationalism.

If this sprawling book has a center, it may be located geographically in the north Caucasus, where trouble actually makes international headlines. If the Kumyk, Lak, and Balkars seem scarcely more than fictional to the average reader of the *New York Times,* the Chechens at least have passed the threshold of serious name recognition. But rather than offering a survey of their savage stop-and-start war with Russia, Karny fixes on one of its neglected and misunderstood aspects. His key to understanding Chechnya is not Jokar Dudayev, the former Soviet general who launched the breakaway republic on its suicidal course in 1994, but an obscure nineteenth-century goatherd named Kunta Haji. In the 1840s, Kunta undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca, and brought home with him from Baghdad the Sufi tradition of the *zikr,* or "remembrance," a kind of loud ecstatic dance in which the believer recites the name of God as many as 845 times. Russian observers who saw Chechen soldiers doing the *zikr* in 1994, Karny writes, mistook it for a "war dance," the harbinger of orthodox, revolutionary Islam. But if there's a battle, Karny writes, it's taking place "entirely within each dancer, pitting him against his flawed self, in quest of purification." The loud *zikr*—banned in Russia for 120 years and forbidden today by the puritanical Wahhabi Muslims who control Mecca—is an affirmation of the free spirit that communes directly with God, and, for Karny, is an emblem of the Caucasians' distinct brand of Islam.

Chechnya, Karny discovers, survives not just in the embers of Grozny, but in a remarkable diaspora. The Chechens have a tradition of loyal service to whatever nation gives them shelter. (There are only a few thousand Chechens in Iraq, but five Chechen generals led Saddam Hussein's army against Iran in the 1980s.) As chance would have it, Israel made peace with Jordan as Karny was writing his book, and he traveled over the border to meet some of the twelve thousand Chechens of Jordan, who have their own school in Amman and many representatives at the high-

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BRIAN DOYLE is the editor of *Portland Magazine*. CARLO ROTELLA is Assistant Professor of English at Boston College. WENDY LESSER is the editor of *The Threepenny Review*. MICHAEL S. HARPER is University Professor and Professor of English at Brown University.

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est levels of society. One of them, Dr. Fakhrudin Daghestani, president of Jordan's Royal Scientific Society, grew up in the Golan Heights, where his father was a prosperous landholder. And so the Golan, Karny discovers, is not just Israeli, or Syrian, but Chechen as well.

Karny writes self-consciously as a citizen of a nation that, as he puts it, is "founded on a premise of great antiquity" even as "the mid-term past is selectively wiped out." As in Israel, so in the Caucasus. It happens that some of the book's most fascinating chapters concern the Caucasus's Jewish and quasi-Jewish communities. There are the so-called Mountain Jews, who trace their origins back to the destruction of the First Temple, but are regarded by their neighbors as just another Caucasian tribe with eccentric beliefs. (Throughout the region Karny hears reports of Muslims who light candles on Friday, and suddenly appear carrying fragments of Torah scrolls.) And then there are the Subbotniks, members of a Russian sect that was exiled to the Caucasus after it rejected the Orthodox church and embraced Judaism in the early nineteenth century. The Subbotniks are not Caucasians or even "highlanders." But their sheer historical improbability and cultural fragility makes them at home in this book. "As I write these words," Karny says, "their last remaining members are either dying or scattering. I was one of their last visitors, and I bear witness to the final chapter in their journey."

Karny takes one of his epigrams from the historian Ernest Renan: "It's good to know how to forget." But for all his disgust at the manipulations of history by tin-pot nationalists, he seems guided as much by the post-Holocaust commandment, "Thou shalt remember." Ignorance of one atrocity, he argues, paves the way for another. To paraphrase Hitler's famous comment about the Armenian genocide on the eve of the Nazi Holocaust, who today remembers the slaughter of the Balkars, the Karachai, the Kalmyks, the Meskhesian Turks? (Stalin shipped these and three other small nations to Central Asia in 1943–44, and left them to die in what Karny calls a "Final Dissolution.") But he also writes with full awareness of the dangers of remembrance. "At times the quest for one nation's memory turns into an attempt to demolish that of another. . . . Such attempts rarely go unreciprocated." His final chapter, on the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, tragically illustrates this idea, and points up the West's own amnesia. In 1988, massive Armenian demonstrations against supposed Azeri atrocities in Nagorno-Karabakh, captured on video and televised worldwide, were one of the most dramatic early signs that Gorbachev's center was not holding. But who today remembers the sufferings of the 1.5 million people eventually made homeless in that obscure conflict, which helped set the Soviet Union itself on a course of Final Dissolution?

Karny, alas, is as workmanlike a writer as he is a dazzlingly resourceful reporter, and the book is full of repetitions, abrupt chapter breaks, and jarring crosscuts between past and present. But perhaps some confusion comes with the territory. "Here's a piece of advice to a traveler in the Caucasus: each time you go to interview a nationalist leader, carry an encyclopedia, preferably all thirty-two volumes of it," Karny writes. This hypothetical encyclopedia, for Karny, is the skeptic's AK-47. And skepticism of any one group's claims, he argues, is essential to the survival of the many exotic species gathered in the Caucasian "museum of nations." His own doubt, Karny makes clear, should not be confused with a lack of sympathy for the "heroic futility" of so many national quests: "This book is written with the utmost respect for aspirations and pain. There is not a single group in the Caucasus that does not deserve"—if not its own parliament and rocket launchers—"its place in the sun."

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Mr. Bellow's Planet

BELLOW: A BIOGRAPHY
By James Atlas. Random House. $35.

Reviewed by SANFORD PINSKER

James Atlas's long-awaited biography of Saul Bellow is at once indispensable and something of a disappointment—indispensable because of the mountains of new information it contains, and disappointing because of the reductive, often ungenerous portrait that emerges. As a minor character observes about the larky, picaresque protagonist of *The Adventures of Augie March*, "There's opposition in him." The same thing might be said of Bellow himself: he resisted the conventional wisdom about success parceled out first by his father and then by his well-heeled older brothers, and chose instead the riskier course of becoming an artist—and he resisted those critics who insisted on describing him as a "Jewish writer" rather than as a thoroughly American one. In fact, what Moses Herzog calls "Reality Instructors" were never in short supply, and Bellow took an undisguised pleasure in resisting all of them. Like Augie, he was not "adoptable," whether the cause of the moment was Marxism, Reichian psychology, or any other intellectual fashion that might distract from the high calling of writing serious fiction. Atlas makes this aspect of Bellow's stubborn (some would say, cranky) temperament abundantly clear.

Less certain, however, is what accounts for Bellow's opposition, and what kept it rolling after the big money poured in and the literary awards piled up. If it is true that Bellow's vaulting ambition was to become a capital-A Artist (and in this respect, what he wanted he most assuredly got), it is even truer that his central project was the preservation of the individual soul at a time when everything in the culture seemed bent on its destruction. In retrospect, one can say that Bellow's large, impressive canon answers the question posed in *Dangling Man*, his first novel, published in 1944: "Where was there a particle of what, elsewhere, or in the past, had spoken in man's favor?" But as Atlas's chronicle of Bellow's early career demonstrates, his humanistic vision was often a hard sell. In 1951, he wrote to the Rockefeller Foundation, hoping that it would fork over some badly needed cash. His grant proposal included the following by-now-familiar Bellow manifesto: "As the external social fact grows larger, more powerful and tyrannical, man appears in the novel reduced in will, strength, freedom, and scope." What was badly needed, he argued, was fiction as great in heart as it was in soul. The foundation turned him down flat—and this long before the days of political correctness and identity politics. Nonetheless, Bellow persisted. However sad-eyed, confused, or downright vulnerable his dreamy protagonists may be, they try hard not to let brutal realism have the last word. Indeed, I would argue that this is where "opposition" takes on a larger significance, one that dwarfs the personal crotchets recorded on far too many of Bellow's pages.

Granted, Atlas is not out to write a critical biography, feeling (rightly) that the dozens of book-length critical studies and hundreds of academic articles have already done that work, thank you very much. Instead, he means to weave a portrait that enables him to take full advantage of the letters, manuscripts, and insider information that Bellow was willing to share with him. Earlier biographers were not so fortunate. Mark Harris's *Saul Bellow: Drumlin Woodchuck*, published in 1980, tells us more about a futile, often comic effort to pin down an elusive subject than it does about Bellow; and Ruth Miller's 1991 *Saul Bellow: A Biography of the Imagination* shows that even a lifelong friendship is no guarantee that the relationship between biographer and subject won't go sour. No doubt Atlas must have wondered—indeed, must sometimes have feared—when the wrath directed against so many others would be visited upon him. As it turns out, none of Atlas's worst fears materialized, but other problems popped up instead. In contrast to the case of Delmore Schwartz, the subject of Atlas's first excursion into biography, the biographer's proximity to the life he was writing now became, in his words,

Sanford Pinsker is Arthur and Katherine Shadek Humanities Professor at Franklin and Marshall College. His books include *Bearing the Bad News: Contemporary American Literature and Culture.*

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"so close (so suffocating, Bellow might have said) that it recalled the scene in his [Bellow's] early novel *The Victim*, where Leventhal, the beleaguered hero, is forced to carry his double, his tormentor, Allbee, on his back." Indeed, there were moments, Atlas goes on to say, "when I wondered if I was living my own life at all."

Anyone spending ten-plus years on the biography of a major literary figure probably suffers a version of the psychic malady Atlas describes, but in his case there were, let us say, special complications—not only because his subject is still numbered among the living and because that fact cannot help raising eyebrows, but also because what might be called "Bellow fatigue" led to a certain amount of mean-spirited backlash. For example, no biographer can ignore the fact that the much-married Bellow had his share of domestic difficulties, but is it necessary to document every flirtation, every one-night stand, every full-blown affair? And is it necessary to provide us with a scorecard of how Bellow presumably performed in the sack? It is, after all, one thing to learn that the landlord of an early Bellow residence at 2629 West Augusta Boulevard, Chicago, was a Polish laborer named Lusczowiak (having unearthed such a fact, however obscure, however irrelevant, which biographer could possibly leave it out?), and quite another to tell us that one ex-lover remarked that Bellow "couldn't abandon himself sexually," while another claimed that he "didn't know a clitoris from a kneecap." Atlas's exercise in *cherchez la femme* leads (where else?) back to Bellow's mother ("It was a bondage doomed to play itself out in five marriages and a string of bad relationships"), just as Bellow's hate-love relationship with his father presumably accounts for the drive to become a rich and famous novelist.

Nor does Atlas stop there. In a carefully crafted sentence, one that distances his own view from that of the prevailing culture, he says this: "Read from today's vantage, informed by multiculturalism, *Henderson the Rain King* is racist in the extreme"; and when he gets to *Mr. Sammler's Planet* he tightens the noose by quoting the highly charged scene in which Sammler is sexually bullied by an elegant black pickpocket; he concludies that "a more overtly racist cluster of images is hard to imagine." One scarcely knows what to say, other than to offer up Bellow's canon as the best rebuttal to readings so narrowly and unfairly focused.

Granted, Bellow was never one to suffer fools gladly—whether they were symbol-sniffing academics, ex-wives, fashionable intellectuals, or anybody who gave him so much as a lukewarm review. His wit was often abrasive enough to strip the varnish from a table, but, then again, he was trying to become Chicago's premier fictionist, not its mayor. What he cared about was the "higher biography" (his term) that would emerge when portraits of his significant dead (Isaac Rosenfeld, Delmore Schwartz, Allan Bloom) were transmogrified into fiction; the lessons thus extracted would reveal the deeply human truths that, in our heart of hearts, "we know we know we know."

Alas, little consensus remains about literature or the people who spend their lives making it. Let me nonetheless hope that two small but crucially important understandings remain. One is that the makers of beautiful things are not necessarily beautiful themselves. Despite the objections sprinkled throughout this review, I harbor no wish that Atlas had written hagiography rather than the book he did. Serious Bellow readers are in his debt, not only because he assembled and shaped vast amounts of generally unknown information, but also because he is, himself, such a clear and supple writer. The other is that no biography is destined to be "definitive." Every thirty or forty years—and occasionally much sooner than that—major writers are reassessed, sometimes because new material comes to light, more often because each age writes its own books and its own biographies. Other scholarly portraits of Bellow surely loom on the horizon, though they will have neither the advantages nor the disadvantages that make James Atlas's *Bellow* such a distinguished and important work. My hope, of course, is that these future biographers will have no need to rehearse, much less to belabor, the cultural warfare that once reduced all of Bellow's art and life to a stray remark, made in the 1990s, to the effect that he would read the Zulus when they produced a Tolstoy. On the other hand, it is equally possible that future generations won't give a fig about Bellow, or about the state of the modern soul he represents. Ironically enough, that is precisely when people will need Bellow's humane fiction more than ever.

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Math at 98.6°

WHERE MATHEMATICS COMES FROM
By George Lakoff and Rafael Nuñez.
Basic Books. $30.

Reviewed by
JOHN ALLEN PAULOS

Books on the philosophy of mathematics or mathematical pedagogy are frequently rather tiresome, rehashing standard positions and developing, if the reader is lucky, a nuance or two. *Where Mathematics Comes From* is an exception, refreshing both in its obliquely revealing approach and in its fascinating, sometimes iconoclastic conclusions. Tracing abstract concepts back to their physical, human sources, linguist George Lakoff and psychologist Rafael Nuñez contend that mathematics arises out of ordinary cognitive processes, thereby delivering a body blow to Platonic notions of mathematics and indirectly suggesting broad new avenues of educational research.

From a rather puny innate endowment—an ability to distinguish objects, to subitize (recognize very small whole numbers at a glance), and to add and subtract whole numbers up to three—human beings extend their mathematical powers through a complex of neurally based spatial-relations concepts, image schemas, and, especially, cognitive metaphors. Our primordial experiences with vertical orientation, physical force, and bodily movement lead us to form more sophisticated complexes of ideas and to internalize the inferences associated with them. The notion of a conceptual metaphor is familiar from Lakoff's earlier work, particularly *Metaphors We Live By*, which underscored the ubiquity of everyday metaphors. To grasp abstract concepts, we project embodied or sensory motor reasoning onto them. Affection, for example, is frequently understood in terms of physical warmth: "She was cool to him"; "he gradually warmed to her."

In mathematical terms, Lakoff and Nuñez define a metaphor as a mapping from a source domain, which is familiar, to a target domain, which is less so. The size of a pile of bricks, for example, suggests a number, and a bigger pile suggests a greater number. This correspondence also preserves inferences: our understanding that the combination of two piles of bricks always results in another pile of bricks grounds our understanding of the notion of arithmetical closure. The source domain—the pile of bricks—is an object collection, and the target domain is arithmetic. This is the first of four basic grounding metaphors of arithmetic. Another is that of the measuring stick. The length of a physical segment is associated with the size of a number, a longer segment with a greater number, and so on. Similar metaphorical correspondences exist between arithmetic and motion and construction.

Throughout the book, the authors attempt to demystify mathematical thought, stressing that the source of mathematical ideas is not radically different from the source of other, more commonplace notions. They point out, for example, that our understanding of algebraic variables is similar to our understanding of pronouns. "Whoever did this was sick" should be compared to "If $x + 2 = 7$, then $x = 5$." Contrariwise, they show that misunderstanding can also flow from these prosaic notions. In particular, the root of some of our mystification is the numbers/things metaphor, which leads to Platonism and our usually unarticulated belief that numbers are entities "up there" somewhere. Lakoff and Nuñez are intent on debunking what they term the "romance of mathematics," namely that mathematics is abstract and disembodied, yet exists independently of us; that mathematical objects and truths are transcendent; that proofs allow us to discover these transcendent truths; and that to learn mathematics is to learn the language of nature.

The book requires a bit more mathematical knowledge than many general readers are likely to possess, but one of its pleasures is that it treats numerous areas of mathematics and doesn't skip over all the details. In the more technical second half of the volume, the authors deal with infinity and the many appli-

John Allen Paulos, Professor of Mathematics at Temple University, is the author of *Innumeracy* and *A Mathematician Reads the Newspaper*. He writes the "Who's Counting?" column for ABCNews.com.

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cations of the basic metaphor of infinity (BMI), proposing that the idea of an actual (not merely potential) infinity derives metaphorically from the notion of the result of a process. Not surprisingly, we conceptualize the result of an infinite unending process in analogy to the result of a completed process, one that does have an end. The authors hypothesize that all cases of actual infinity in mathematics derive from different and often nonobvious applications of the BMI. Transfinite cardinal numbers and ordinal numbers, for example, stem from quite distinct notions of infinity, one having to do with infinite collections, the other with infinite lists.

In one of the most interesting and compelling sections of the book, the authors describe the cognitive basis of infinitesimal numbers in terms of conceptual metaphors. Many mathematicians consider infinitesimal numbers—nonzero numbers smaller than $1/n$ for every whole number n—to be "non-rigorous" at best, but the idea is a natural one, corresponding to the everyday notion of a speck without discernible width. Leibniz used the metaphor of an infinitesimal, as did mathematicians for almost two hundred of years, to develop calculus and its offshoots. In contrast, Newton had to invoke a mysterious new process of taking the limit in his development of the subject. To use this process, we must go through a rather counterintuitive dance. If interested in how fast we're going at exactly three o'clock, we take our average velocity (distance divided by time) over shorter and shorter time intervals around three o'clock and "in the limit" we get the instantaneous velocity. Newton's notion of limit was rightly criticized by Berkeley and others who pointed out that either a time interval has length zero, in which case division is impossible, or it does not, and we don't have the instantaneous velocity. This logical lacuna wasn't filled until the nineteenth century, and even today students are often baffled by the traditional definition of limits. More in accord with our intuitions, infinitesimals work more naturally, since one can actually divide by these nonzero specks, and finding limits is reduced to a kind of arithmetic.

Although Lakoff and Nuñez emphasize the contingent, sometimes cultural origin of mathematical ideas and disciplines, they reject the postmodernist view that mathematics is merely a cultural artifact. Perhaps because they want to distance themselves from excesses frequently associated with postmodernism, their writing, despite its focus on metaphor, is devoid of rhetorical flourish. They hardheadedly avow their appreciation of the precision, universality, and abstraction of the subject, and they grant that there are such things as mathematical discoveries (as opposed to inventions) that are possible once mathematical concepts are established within a community. Yet do they really succeed in banishing all Platonic notions, which they compare to religious ideas? Although few can continue to believe in a literal Platonic heaven where numbers, functions, curves, probabilities, and other mathematical characters cavort timelessly, a more sophisticated Platonism is still defensible, especially with respect to the integers and theories associated with them.

Tellingly, Leopold Kronecker, a nineteenth-century contemporary of Georg Cantor, used religious/mathematical language to make the same distinction between what is eternal and what is not. He famously pronounced that God created the integers and that everything else was man-made. The sheer variety of set theories, conceptions of real, granular, and hyperreal numbers, and alternative geometries, algebras, and logics do suggest their non-transcendent nature, and the authors make "atheistic" disbelief in their Platonic residence more plausible. On the other hand, the independent existence of the integers seems to call for a more agnostic stance. Arithmetic may, for example, be transcendent in the sense that any sentient being would eventually develop the metaphors that ground it and be led to its truths, which can thus be said to inhere in the universe. Other patches for a quasi-Platonism are also possible.

Whatever one's views on the nature of mathematical entities and truths, however, *Where Mathematics Comes From* is salutary in its emphasis on the human origin of mathematical concepts. Careful study of the conceptual metaphors that give meaning to mathematical ideas should be quite useful pedagogically, and it is in this area, rather than in the philosophy of mathematics, that this provocative book's impact will be greatest. A better realization of the sometimes unconscious, usually mundane sources of complex ideas can only help us learn and teach. All in all, the book adds body heat to the cold and beautiful abstraction of mathematics.

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The Perforated Hymn

BHAGAVAD GITA:
A NEW TRANSLATION
By Stephen Mitchell. Harmony Books. $20.

Reviewed by SUNIL IYENGAR

If the *Bhagavad Gita*'s relationship to its parent epic, the *Mahabharata,* sometimes appears strained, that is because Sanskrit literature snubs the Aristotelian unities. Just as the great war of the *Mahabharata* is about to begin—a long-deferred dispute between the valiant Pandavas and their cousins, the Kauravas—Arjuna the archer asks his friend Krishna to draw their chariot between the two armies. Confronted with the faces of so many friends and relatives fighting on the wrong side—grandsires, teachers, uncles, and in-laws—Arjuna shudders with guilt and drops his bow. Krishna, really an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, takes this moment to instruct his favorite cousin on a variety of spiritual themes, in a 2,800-line didactic paean we call the *Bhagavad Gita,* or "Divine Song."

All this time, the two armies remain locked on either side of the discourse. At the poem's climax, Krishna appears as *Viswarupa,* a fearsome aspect of Vishnu. In this form, he utters lines that Robert Oppenheimer recalled on witnessing the first atomic explosion, "I am death, shatterer of worlds, / annihilating all things." We must assume that Krishna's revelation is made to Arjuna alone, and not to the opposing armies, who would probably have lost the nerve to fight had they known the prophesied outcome:

> As moths rush into a flame
> and are burned in an instant, all
> beings plunge down [Krishna's] gullet
> and instantly are consumed.

Despite the intimacy of Krishna and Arjuna's exchange, this cosmic cameo overwhelms the poem's subtler traits. In an amiable preface, translator Stephen Mitchell acknowledges this difficulty: "The most profound sacred texts have a way of self-destructing. They undermine their own authority and gleefully hoist themselves with their own petard."

The allusion to *Hamlet* may bring to mind another vacillating prince's response to an assembled army. On the way to England, Hamlet encounters Fortinbras's troops:

> Examples gross as earth exhort me:
> Witness this army of such mass and charge,
> Led by a delicate and tender prince . . .
> Exposing what is mortal and unsure
> To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,
> Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great
> Is not to stir without great argument,
> But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
> When honor's at the stake.

In the second chapter of the *Gita,* Krishna tests this motive in Arjuna, the hero's relish of a good fight. In Mitchell's prose,

> Why this timidity, Arjuna, at a time of crisis? It is unworthy of a noble mind; it is shameful and does not lead to heaven. This cowardice is beneath you, Arjuna; do not give in to it. Shake off your weakness. Stand up now like a man.

Like the great Dane, Arjuna remains unconvinced. (His foe Duryodhana, by contrast, is all too willing to find quarrel in a straw. Earlier in the *Mahabharata,* when Krishna attempts to negotiate a land deal for the Pandavas, Duryodhana stresses he will not part with one pinprick of soil.) Krishna's strategy, throughout the sixteen remaining chapters, is to persuade Arjuna that his conflict transcends any personal grievances, that the victors and vanquished have already been determined, and that Arjuna should dedicate his actions and their fruits to Krishna himself.

Of all the fruits engendered by the British Raj, perhaps the sweetest were its contributions to Sanskrit scholarship. One wonders if Gandhi appreciated this irony when, as a law student in London, he savored the *Gita* in a translation by Sir Edwin Arnold, Victorian man of letters. Arnold's *Bhagavadgita,* still available

~ Sunil Iyengar is a writer and editor in Washington, D.C. He is compiling an anthology for the American Poetry and Literacy Project.

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in a Dover Thrift Edition, is a technical marvel: blank verse with variant lyrics interlaced. Reading it, Gandhi must have experienced the same thrill that Thoreau did, forty years earlier, when he brought the poem to Walden Pond:

> In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta [*sic*], since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial.

Both Emerson and Thoreau encountered the *Gita* through Charles Wilkins's 1785 translation, the first English effort. (Emerson called it "the first of books.") While it is often remarked that Thoreau's civil disobedience theory was a precursor to Gandhi's concept of *ahimsa,* or action through nonviolence, it is less widely known that the two thinkers had similar misgivings about one aspect of the *Gita.* Neither could reconcile the poem's emphasis on disinterested duty with Krishna's most obvious and accessible message, to take up arms and fight. "Kreeshna's argument, it must be allowed, is defective," Thoreau wrote in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.* "No significant reason is given why Arjoon should fight."

For his part, Gandhi considered the war-related elements of the *Gita* to be obligatory: "The author of the *Mahabharata* has used them merely to drive home his religious theme." Yet Gandhi's familiarity with the epic allowed him to justify *ahimsa* with particulars from the plot. "The author . . . has not established the necessity of physical warfare; on the contrary, he has proved its futility. He has made the victors shed tears of sorrow and repentance, and has left them nothing but a legacy of miseries."

Gandhi is referring to the end of the epic, when all one hundred Kauravas have been slain, and a Priam-like patriarch mourns them. It is this knowledge of the *Mahabharata*'s twilit poignancy, its Technicolor episodes and characters, which so many *Gita* readers lack. Without it, one is tempted to lapse into relativism, to make too much of Krishna's declaration, "I am the same to all beings; / I favor none and reject none." Yet within the same stanza, Krishna adds: "But those who worship me live / within me and I live in them." This is the core of the *Gita*'s contradictory thesis: although everything is contained in Krishna, Krishna is not contained in everything. He has unequivocally chosen sides in the Pandava-Kaurava feud, and throughout the *Mahabharata* he will do everything in his power, even breaking with established *dharma* when necessary, to save his beloved friend. The endearments he showers on Arjuna—the characters address each other familiarly throughout the *Gita*—reinforce their human relationship. As Mitchell's Krishna has it:

> I am speaking for your own welfare,
> since you are precious to me.
> . . . . . .
> you will surely come to me; this
> I promise, because I love you.

When Arjuna discovers that Krishna is the Creator, he winningly pleads:

> If, thinking you human, I ever
> touched you or patted your back
> or called you "dear fellow" or "friend"
> through negligence or affection,
>
> or greeted you with disrespect,
> thoughtlessly, when we were playing
> or resting, alone or in public,
> I beg you to forgive me . . .

From a historical perspective, this personal affection for God is a characteristic of the *bhakti* mode of Hinduism. (Of five roads to salvation, including duty, action, knowledge, and renunciation, *bhakti*—or devotion—is clearly Krishna's preference.) Scholars have suggested that such passages were woven into the text by Brahman priests who sought to promote an alternative to Vedic ritual on the one hand and to Buddhist renunciation on the other. Whatever the *Gita*'s origins, they are impossible to trace. Believed to have been composed orally, independent of the *Mahabharata,* the *Gita* probably approached its final form in the first few centuries A.D. Epic and hymn read like palimpsests: layers of topical digressions erode a sense of unity. Kenneth Rexroth laments this tendency in *Classics Revisited* (1980):

> The reworking of the poem [the *Mahabharata*], with every cultural change, and the In-

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> dian conservatism which cannot bear to throw anything out, result at last in the erosion of personality and human interest in the characters and their relations. . . . If all actions are separate but equal, there can be no drama.

When such an enthusiast of Asian literature professes bafflement by the "jungle profusion" of Hindu mythology, what hope is there for the lay reader?

It is telling that, though *Gita* translations abound, one is hard pressed to find the *Mahabharata* in English. R. K. Narayan and C. Rajagopalachari are responsible for two fair abridgments. But for a second-generation Indian-American such as myself, the best nonscholarly versions appear orally or in Indian comic books. If a non-Indian reader wants a brief glimpse, he or she should consult Winthrop Sargeant, a *Gita* translator who deals thoroughly with the epic in his introduction.

Stephen Mitchell disposes of the *Mahabharata* in a single paragraph. Instead of enlivening his preface with anecdotes from the epic, he discusses the *Gita* poet as a disembodied seer, a kindred spirit of Lao-tzu and the Chinese Zen Masters (poets he has also translated). With New Age implications, Mitchell sings of a customized spirituality, lauding the "kind of sage [who] barely notices his body and its needs, [who] has no use for money or possessions."

His translation, however, has merit. An elusive music hums through his particular innovation, "a loose trimeter quatrain," in which "no two consecutive lines have the identical rhythm." He varies those lines artfully, seldom conducting their flow across stanzas, and often winding up with a refrain. As poetry, his *Bhagavad Gita* marks an advance on the free-verse translation of Barbara Stoler Miller, its nearest equivalent. Essentially didactic, the *Gita* robs us of the conventional rewards we demand of poetry. Concrete images flash through only a few frugal similes, when Krishna is describing himself or the ideal devotee. Hindu terminology such as the *gunas,* denoting attributes of the psyche, presents further difficulties. Certain

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THE TRUE GIFT THOMAS BRINGS TO THE QUEST

In 1945 a library was discovered that had been cached for about sixteen centuries, and in it was found a translation of a document that originated in the first century. This document, titled the *Gospel of Thomas*, claimed to be sayings that puzzled Thomas, a neophyte student (disciple), who wrote them down *as he listened to Jesus speaking them* (or soon thereafter). Scholars, however, have not followed up on this claim, choosing instead to treat its 113 sayings as pericopes with distinctive origins and redactions, just as the anecdotes that constitute the Gospels of the New Testament are treated and thereby found to be, for the most part, fabrications, myths, altered accounts, or hazy reminiscences. Quests of the historical Jesus are fundamentally dependent on these pliable anecdotes, and as a prominent scholar has remarked, "every conceivable scenario, every extreme theory imaginable, has long since been proposed." But a scenario never before imagined indeed is "proposable" if we presume that the claim is true and use the *Gospel of Thomas* as our determinative source for a history of Jesus (after all, as notes it has to be chronological, and as notes of enigmas written down for study at leisure they have to be reasonably what Jesus actually said). First, we find that the chronology of *Thomas* correlates with the bare-bones sequence of events given in the *Gospel of Mark* and the recently discovered *Secret Gospel of Mark*, which gives confidence that we are dealing with notes that were taken day by day. Second, we find why the sayings were so puzzling to a student with Jewish upbringing: Jesus was disguising his concurrence with Epicurean philosophy, which most Jews despised as materialistic, hedonistic, and atheistic. His disciples never detected his apostasy though, as evidenced by the messianic doctrine that they later adopted. We find his Epicureanism reflected in his concept of how human personality survives death. Also, he was concerned with authority and wherein it lies. For him God and Caesar are man-made to satisfy the two kinds of authority that societies feel are needed. He believed instead that a person should recognize himself/herself as an ultimate authority, destined for a real kingdom of heaven created by human beings through means suggested by Epicurean physics. This history of Jesus is presented in ***You Will Not Taste Death--Jesus and Epicureanism*** by Jack Hannah. This seminal 321 page paperback is $12 postpaid. Please order by check from:

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quatrains in Mitchell's text adopt the grave abstractions of Eliot's *Four Quartets:*

> You have a right to your actions,
> but never to your actions' fruits.
> Act for the action's sake.
> And do not be attached to inaction.

Eliot, who had a smattering of Sanskrit, wrote similar-sounding lines in "Burnt Norton" (Krishna and Arjuna appear in "The Dry Salvages"): "At the still point, there the dance is, / But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity."

At other times, Mitchell's *Gita* has a Rilkean frankness, and we remember that he is an accomplished translator of the German poet:

> He who fails to keep turning
> the wheel thus set in motion
> has damaged the working of the world
> and has wasted his life, Arjuna.

Treating the *Gita* as a document of spiritual perfection, Mitchell sometimes seems naïvely disappointed, as when he suggests that "chapters 13 to 18 are . . . written by a poet who was less spiritually evolved than the author of the first two-thirds of the poem." He risks trivializing the poem's contexts when he apologizes to women for a "particular limitation of the Gita's consciousness"—its penchant for male pronouns. But translation is the ultimate presumption. As the *Gita* tells us, one must fight in the face of doubt, with scant regard for returns. As readers, we can be grateful to those who have striven, however imperfectly:

> It is better to do your own duty
> badly, than to perfectly do
> another's; you are safe from harm
> when you do what you should be doing.

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We call to the attention of our readers the following titles, published in 2000, portions of which first appeared in our pages: *Face to Face: A Reader in the World,* by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (Beacon Press); *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Culture,* by Jacques Barzun (HarperCollins); *Nabokov's Butterflies,* by Michael Pyle (Beacon Press); and *Songlines in Michaeltree: New and Collected Poems,* by Michael Harper (Illinois University Press).

Essays from THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR are included in two recently published anthologies: *The Best American Science and Nature Writing,* edited by David Quammen (Houghton Mifflin), and *The Pushcart Prize XXV: Best of the Small Presses, 2001 Edition,* edited by Bill Henderson (W. W. Norton).

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THE READER REPLIES

NARROW RULED

As a woman addicted to generating commonplace books and précis collections for almost seventy years, I was delighted by Nicholson Baker's column "Narrow Ruled" (Autumn). I love being connected to Coleridge, who kept extensive notes on all his reading, calling them his "flycatchers." There are times, though, when surveying my "shelf life" of eight three-ring binders, I'm dismayed by how little I remember of those fascinating facts and fancies. Am I really part of all that I have met, or just an amalgam of Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet—"scribble, scribble," eh, Bouvard?

DORIS LEDERER
West Hartford, Connecticut

FISH, FLESH, AND FOUL

Steven G. Kellman's complaints about how vegetarians are picked on have little validity, except that people should not make fun of each other as a matter of general civility. The rest of his arguments are the same ones vegetarians always make: that they are morally superior because they don't eat animal products. His one redeeming admission is that Hitler was a vegetarian, a fact that most vegetarians conveniently ignore.

Kellman goes over the edge when he equates his inability to get a vegan meal in Poland, or k. d. lang's problems with Alberta cattlemen, with the Catholic Church's persecution of the Albigensians. The Albigensians' vegetarianism was the least of Rome's difficulties with them, and nobody has unleashed God and the secular arm on Professor Kellman or Ms. lang.

Here's what Kellman doesn't get about why vegetarians get on omnivores' nerves: they are rude in a larger social sense. The table is more than a place to put food. It is a place for sharing community. In declining to share our food, Kellman denies us community—suggests indeed that we are not fit to commune with. That is why omnivores do not like vegetarians. Until he can find a way to share more than his conviction that he's right and omnivores are not only wrong but not quite human, Kellman must find community elsewhere.

KATHLEEN STIPEK
Gainesville, Florida

Professor Kellman provides a good historical perspective on vegetarianism, but is inaccurate on Hitler. This is unfortunate, since Hitler is often brought up as a way of tricking vegetarians into admitting that vegetarianism can be married to evil. But two can play this game: if Hitler was not a vegetarian, would that somehow link meat eaters with Hitler? The argument is absurd. It seems to say that if we can't effectively attack the morality of vegetarianism, then we'll come up with an external line of attack by looking for evil vegetarians.

Although it is not for us to apologize for Hitler's supposed vegetarianism, the evidence shows Hitler to have been a meat eater. He had a special fondness for Bavarian sausage, caviar, squab, and ham. This is covered in an article, available on the Internet from Micah Books, a Jewish vegetarian publishing house (www.micahbooks.com/hitlerveg.html). It quotes Robert Payne, who in his book *The Life and Death of Adolph Hitler* writes that Joseph Goebbels invented the notion of Hitler's asceticism, though his life was quite the opposite. These are, of course, marginal issues, and I advance them only because of the way Hitler's purported vegetarianism is used polemically against vegetarians. At its best, vegetarianism is concerned with far more than

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what you or I eat. It has been more than thirty years since the first Earth Day, and we are still, like Sisyphus, waging an uphill struggle to preserve the Earth. Vegetarians can make a significant contribution by supporting vegan ways of eating and types of organic farming that promote nature conservation; by advocating life styles that will reduce global warming and build up the ozone layer; and by opposing the rearrangement of nature through genetic engineering.

SHLOIME PEREL
Montreal

By focusing solely on the issue of vegetarianism vs. carnivorism, Steven Kellman overlooks our society's lack of tolerance and respect toward all non-omnivorous humans. Those who live with dietary restrictions for medical reasons, from diabetes to hypertension to food allergies, frequently experience curiosity and pity from others ("You can't eat X, oh, dear, you poor thing"), and sometimes a degree of animus. Whether certain food groups are eliminated from our diet by personal choice or by factors beyond our control, we all deserve to be treated with respect when it comes to diet. Until we know why someone eats meat, we should not dismiss his or her choice of diet as evidence of a lack of moral fiber.

KATHERINE QUIMBY JOHNSON
Cambridge, Vermont

Professor Kellman might have been more persuasive had he resisted the temptation to boast. The true vegetarian, like the genuine moralist, does what is right because it is right, and need not brag. Virtue *is* its own reward, since nobody is going to pay you for it; and if somebody tries, and you accept, is it still virtue?

WARREN KEITH WRIGHT
Arbyrd, Missouri

Steven Kellman replies: The intensity of response to my essay demonstrates that if anti-vegetarianism has a history, it also claims a future. Few things are as disturbing as other people's eating habits, and it is tempting to banish dissenting diners from the table until they conform.

Mere manners seem to be the basis for Kathleen Stipek's animus against vegetarians. Because we decline to share her food, she takes offense and says we are not fit to share food with anyone. Yet more is at stake than merely pleasing the host. I am willing to break bread with anyone, even a member of Stipek's coercive community of carnivores, but only in the theater would I wish to break a leg.

Stipek is fishing for red herrings when, confirming Shloime Perel's observation that Hitler invariably shows up in arguments against vegetarianism, she contends that a reference to the German führer, in passing, is the "one redeeming admission" in my essay. Because guilt by association is so insidious, the Hitler question receives more attention than it deserves. Adolf Hitler knew how sausages are made, yet, as Perel notes, devoured them with gusto. During a brief period following the death of his niece, Geli Raubal (whom he may have murdered), in 1931, Hitler apparently abstained from meat. His dietary choices were not driven by ethical or ecological considerations. But even if Hitler had been a lifelong, principled vegan, it would be as fallacious to use him to discredit the practice as it would be to claim that because Attila the Hun derived pleasure from the sunrise, we must detest the dawn.

I of course sympathize with Katherine Quimby Johnson's call for greater dietary tolerance. Yet she surely would not extend her deference to cannibals, except under conditions of duress like those of the Donner Party. I recognize that some live their entire lives under physical duress that might be mitigated by animal products, but such cases are rare, and, thanks to nutritional inventiveness, are becoming rarer. Even if physicians felt they had to prescribe broth to ease a few patients, would that outweigh the moral interests of a bull or a hen? Johnson's claim that "we all deserve to be treated with respect when it comes to diet" is difficult to swallow. Richard Nixon's predilection for catsup on cottage cheese merited ridicule; Idi Amin's for the flesh of his opponents, revulsion. A facile call for universal tolerance runs the risk of trivializing matters of life and death by equating the choice between eggplant and veal with one between Rocky Road and Tutti-Frutti.

Warren Keith Wright seems to want to win

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the war against vegetarians by silencing them. Vaunting his own refusal to boast, he would appear to advocate a ban on all discussions of ethical issues, lest someone actually believe in the validity of one position and, believing in it, sound too proud. Should fear of appearing self-righteous keep vegetarians from doing what is right? If it is right not to consume the flesh of sentient beings, is there not also a moral imperative to make the reasons public? Opponents of infanticide and suttee are not content with eschewing the practices themselves.

NOBEL TICS

Grace Marmor Spruch states as a fact that there is no Nobel Prize in mathematics because Gösta Mittag-Leffler "had won what, to Nobel, was the most important prize of all—the woman Nobel wanted to marry." I first heard this story, or a variation of it, while attending graduate school. The variation had Mittag-Leffler running off with Nobel's wife, but since I knew that Nobel had never married, this seemed unlikely. I heard other answers to the question of the nonexistence of a Nobel Prize in mathematics, including speculation that Nobel had had a bad mathematical experience in school, but it seems that the most widely circulated explanations revolve around a grudge between Nobel and Mittag-Leffler. The addition of a romantic triangle adds spice to the account. I believe that there is little evidence for the truth of this story, and I would be interested in knowing Professor Spruch's source. Would it really be possible for Nobel to provide in his will for prizes to be awarded for contributions to "the benefit of mankind," yet let a personal grudge cloud his judgment about the categories in which to award the prizes?

As an aside, Mittag-Leffler was friendly with John Charles Fields, who endowed the Fields Medal, considered the highest award for work in mathematics.

ARTHUR GUETTER
St. Paul, Minnesota

Grace Marmor Spruch replies: I deliberately used as fuzzy a phrase as "The buzz in mathematical circles is . . . " to convey the lack of certifiability of the Nobel–Mittag-Leffler story. As Arthur Guetter points out, the rumors have been rampant, and although one should probably not apply the "Where there is smoke . . . " principle, I did, and selected the version preferred by the most senior, most European-connected, most authoritative-sounding mathematicians I knew. (A relevant but not definitive article by Lars Garding and Lars Hormander is in *The Mathematical Intelligencer*, 7, no. 3, 1985.) As to whether it would have been possible for Nobel to let a personal grudge cloud his judgment, I am touched by and applaud Mr. Guetter's faith in humankind but, unfortunately, do not share it.

I was delighted to learn his story behind the Fields Medal. Dare I ask for a source?

BERKELEY'S RIGHT ANGLES

I felt a perverse enjoyment reading Todd Gitlin's essay on his interment in Berkeley's Barrows Hall. Pain—that is, other people's pain—is riveting. Was the gloomy environment thought to stimulate a compensatory brilliance in the faculty and students, just as the freezing French garret was once considered fertile soil for the budding author?

I applaud Gitlin's restraint in not drawing on the *OED* definitions of the word *barrow* to characterize his workplace:

sb.[1] **3.** A mound of earth or stones erected . . . over a grave.

sb.[2] **1.** A castrated hog.

PHILIP G. DANUFSKY
Los Angeles

CORRIGENDA

In the Autumn 2000 issue, transcription errors resulted in two obviously wrong dates in "The Commonplace Book." Cicero died in 43 B.C., not 412 A.D.; Pliny the Elder died in 79 A.D., not 237 A.D.

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The Podium

A Beastly Century

MARGARET DRABBLE

Though *beastly* was his first recorded word, George Orwell found animals pleasanter than people. In *1984* he demonstrates that we may all be reduced to the lowest of acts: we become worse than rats. The gene is selfish, and the individual man is selfish. We are all potential torturers, and we would all betray our loved ones.

Under pressure, Orwell warns us, we relinquish our certainties, and are willing to agree with inquisitor O'Brien that we see five fingers when we know we see four. In 1951 the American psychologist Solomon Asch published research findings that endorsed this proposition. He asked subjects to judge physically unambiguous stimuli—lines of different lengths—after a number of supposed other subjects had all given the same incorrect judgments. Subjects understandably were upset by the supposed discrepancies; only 25 percent of them stood by their own judgment and never yielded to the bogus majority. Our desire to conform is greater than our respect for objective facts, even when no physical pressure is applied.

Even more alarming were the notorious Milgram experiments of the early 1970s. Subjects were invited to take part in a program that involved inflicting what appeared to be increasingly severe shocks upon supposed volunteer victims, under the instruction of an authority figure. Most obeyed, although they manifested very high levels of stress while doing so. (In fact, the responses of the "torture victims" were being faked.) Milgram claimed that these experiments caused no long-term damage to participants, but they understandably caused uproar—partly because of the element of hoax involved, partly because of the unwelcome suggestion that we would all in some circumstances consent to torture our fellow human beings. We wouldn't even have to be paid. We would volunteer.

History and science seem, in the twentieth century, to have vindicated Orwell's pessimism. Men are far more beastly than the beasts.

—from a talk at the Royal Society of Literature in London, December 14, 2000

Margaret Drabble, novelist and short-story writer, edited *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Her fifteenth novel, *The Peppered Moth*, will be published in April by Harcourt Brace.

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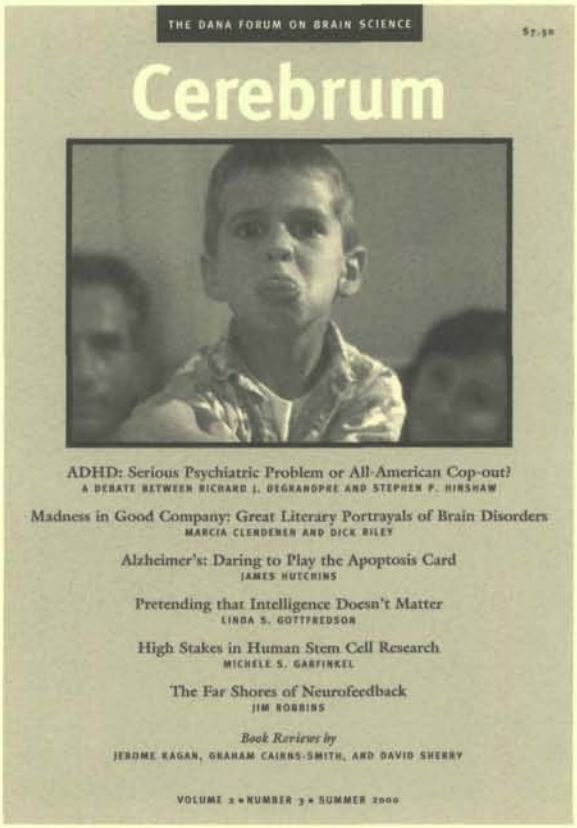

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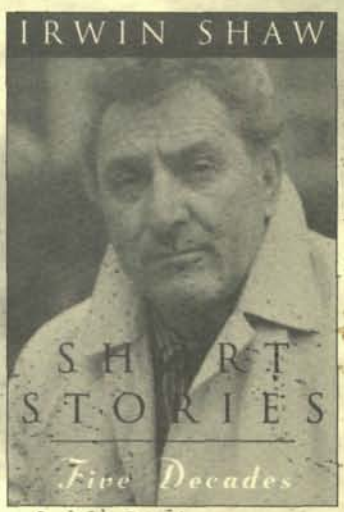

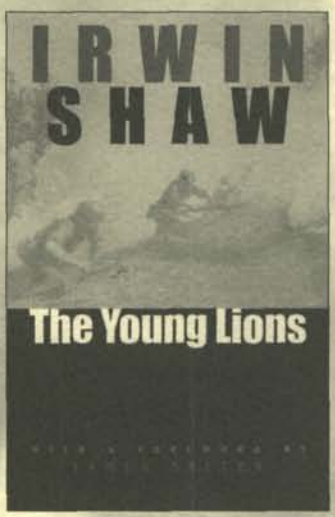

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